Investigating the Potential of Online Video Games in Enhancing EFL Learners' Communication Skills

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Abstract The Information Age has paved immense pathways for the emergence of technology, which led to eventually a complete digitalization of our communities. An ideal example of this advent is the continued growth of online video games (OVG) worldwide between youngsters and adults. To this end, our primary purpose was to understand and learn more about the diverse effects of online video games on EFL learners at the extent to which OVGs can be applied, as a new technique in academic settings. To go deeply through this research, we selected age and gender as variables to investigate their influence on EFL learners' communication skills and their intercultural communicative competence in online video games. We used a mixed-methods approach to collect relevant data for the current research study, including an online learners' questionnaire, interviews, and in-game observations. The results revealed that online video games became beneficial and useful for learners of English as a foreign language. They help improve communication skills and intercultural communication skills in educational settings. However, the list of conditions should be checked for learning and communication in online video games.

Keywords Online Video Games, EFL Learners, Communication Skills, Intercultural Communicative Competence

1. Introduction

The digital revolution has opened massive avenues for the emergence of technology, which is ubiquitous and essential in our daily lives. The emergence of this utility led to the birth of the "Information Age", in which nearly all teenagers occupy a virtual character in a virtual world. Likewise, online video games have also seen a reasonable amount of change, including the invasion of teenage home around the world and the home of Algerian youth in particular. In parallel with such growth, our study aimed to investigate whether playing online video games can result in positive outcomes that might be used constructively to achieve convenient alterations, in the Algerian academic settings. This study examined how some students in the English and Medicine departments of Abdelhamid Ibn Badis University acquired the English language in online video games. In other words, this research work aimed to study the potential of online video games in improving the communication skills of English students, as advanced foreign language learners. Also, their intercultural communicative competence. In this context, we formulated three research questions:

1. What are the effects of online video games on EFL learners?
2. How could online video games be beneficial in improving communication skills and intercultural communication skills of EFL learners?

3. To what extent do the variables age and gender affect EFL learners' communication skills and their intercultural communicative competence in online video games?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Fostering Communication through Online Video Games

Teachers can use online video games to motivate their students to practice their English skills and to learn more at the same time in a fun way, as Hadfield [4] put it; games are "an activity with rules, a goal, and an element of fun." Implementing online video games, teachers can stimulate intense competition among students to induce them to participate more, work harder and be more involved in the classroom. The winners should be rewarded with a specific "prize" offered in real life or the video game, which would not only motivate the rest of the learners to work harder and participate more in the future, but it would also affect positively the atmosphere of the classroom as well as the views of the learners towards their teacher. Arnseth [2]

Azman, H., & Dollsai, N. F [3] suggested that the potential of MMORPGs -massively multiplayer online role play games- function as a pedagogical tool to teach EFL learners in low-stress and anxiety-free environments. The study also discloses that these virtual online video games facilitate socialization and learning EFL by providing the users with authentic and contextualized opportunities to communicate with native speakers and non-native speakers in the target language, which eventually enriches the learners' knowledge, boosts the confidence and foster their communication abilities as they engage in achieving a collective goal with other online teammates.

Wang et al. [8] supported the use of video games in the EFL classroom and stated that the use of these games in the academic setting would help the introverts and shy students to be more engaged in the classroom, as they react positively to them. The usage of video games would reduce anxiety, increase positive feelings and self-confidence of the introverts, due to the absence of judgment, criticism, and punishment aspects. Thus, these individuals would be given a friendly space to practice their foreign language freely in a low-stress environment through their avatars.

2.2. Online Video Games in Enhancing the Intercultural Communication

In 2019, E Shliakhovchuk [6] investigated the potential of the game "The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion" in acquiring cultural literacy, intercultural communicative skills, and

broadening intercultural empathy. The results of the study suggest that video games have a powerful influence on reinforcing and weakening social labels and minority stereotypes, as well as providing the users with a deep understanding of socio-political issues such as racism and Eurocentrism. The researcher disclosed the results of the study as follows: "video games help acquire cultural knowledge and develop intercultural literacy, socio-cultural literacy, cultural awareness, self-awareness, and the cultural understanding of different geopolitical spaces; and to some extent also facilitate the development of intercultural skills" E. Shliakhovchuk [6]

A study by S Alhabash [1] explored the potential of video games in enhancing American students' cultural awareness of foreign nations as well as an understanding of international conflicts. The study investigated how the game PeaceMaker, a role-playing video game simulation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, would affect the explicit and implicit attitudes of American students toward Palestine and Israel as two separated countries and two different people. After playing the game for a short time, participants reported main changes in attitudes towards the two nations, the overall attitudes towards Palestinians positively changed, and those towards Israelis negatively changed.

In 2010, Peng W et al. [7] conducted a study using the game "Darfur is Dying" to investigate the potential of interactive video games in influencing people to help and empathize with foreign nations. A portion of the participants was asked to play the interactive game, and the other portion of the participants was asked to read a text with similar information about the crisis in Darfur. The results showed that the students that played the game "Darfur is Dying", aged 10 to 14, were more influenced and willing to help the Darfurian people than those who solely read a text with comparable information about the crisis in Darfur.

3. Method

To collect as much relevant data as possible, we used mixed- methods research to conduct our study, which includes the collection, analysis and integration of quantitative and qualitative research.

The rationale behind using the quantitative approach is a result of our need to gather data in a numerical form, from different individuals to have structured and statistical data, which can be used to construct graphs and tables of raw data to explain our phenomenon. As for the qualitative research method, we used it to understand humans, behaviours, lived experiences and perceptions; in other words, the qualitative research allows the researcher to study people in their natural setting. The qualitative research method would provide our study with a "human voice" and "give life" to our findings, in other words,

“Hybrid data, allows us to keep the soul in the data” Seemann [5]

3.1. Context

We conducted this study in the English Language and Medicine Departments at Abd al-Hamid Ibn Badis Mostaganem University. Our goal behind this selection is to get the largest group of students to obtain reliable and pertinent results.

3.2. Participants

The participants were 35 men and 15 women from Abdel Hamid Bin Badis University, aged 17 to 22. The 40 students were from the English Department, 25 out of these were licence students, whereas the other 15 were master students.

The remaining 10 participants of our study were from the medicine department, seven males and three females, from various levels, were involved in our research study.

3.3. Data Collection Instruments

We used three data-gathering instruments: i) An online questionnaire for EFL learners, ii) a gamers' interview, iii) online video game observation for this study.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

The aim of choosing the three previously mentioned tools relies on our study requirements to confirm or reject the hypotheses; the researcher needed to collect hybrid data. The questionnaires were distributed to all the 50 participants of our study; only a few participants showed interest. They agreed to do an interview, and take part in the in-game observations.

The questionnaire was submitted to online using the Google Forms. We used a web-based questionnaire to provide participants with a low-stress environment, and give them the time necessary to submit their responses; therefore, the answers would be more accurate and valid. Wang et al. [8] found that web-based questionnaires in school-based surveys are more reliable than face-to-face questionnaires.

The web-based questionnaires are also free, which would prevent the researcher from wastage of pages, and prevent the respondents from wasting time by physical presence. Also, to save more time for the researcher, the Google Forms would provide the researcher with the users' responses in an easier way, and present the numerical data in various graphs to be read.

Nevertheless, six males and two females, from both departments, agreed to be interviewed and participate in the observation. Due to the slow internet services, the interview was conducted face to face with students, in the

Department of English, at Abdelhamid Ibn Badis University.

The in-game observations divided into two stages to gather a suitable team of participants and online game for convenient and valid data for our study. The first observation, which is the initial observation, was undertaken with two groups of participants composed of four players each in a set of different online video games. It aims to meet the necessary conditions for the survey. The second stage is the preparative observation that has allowed the researcher to choose the most suitable online video game; League of Legends, and the most convenient participants. We undertook it through the online video game League of Legends, with three males and one female, which revenue is used as valid data collected from the in-game observation.

4. Data Analysis

The data are analysed and interpreted in three phases. Each phase deals with the analysis of an instrument used in data collection. We approached each stage related to the given research questions.

4.1. The Questionnaire

4.1.1. The Effects of OVGs as Platforms

The graph below presents the views of the participants regarding the effects of online video games as platforms.

Figure 1. The Benefits of Online Video Games

Figure (1) shows that approximately all of the participants (98%) declared that the use of online video games is very advantageous; however, surprisingly, 2% (1 female participant) declared that online video games are somewhat disadvantageous. Below is an extract of the participants to explain what has been already said, in this section:

“Online video games are nice. However, without proper

supervision, they can become very disadvantageous and unhealthy. I won't allow my kids to play online unless they're trustworthy." Said the one female that represents 2%.

"I do not think I have learned from school as much as I did learn from playing online, plus I had to make friends I could never make in real life. Playing online taught me many things but most importantly made me feel socially accepted."

"You can have fun, learn, meet new people, experience new things, and feel the rush all at once. I never joined a game to learn, I just happen to be learning anyway."

4.1.2. The Effects of OVGs on EFL Learners' Communication Abilities and Intercultural Communicative Competence

As has been mentioned above, the informants were asked about their thoughts on the effects of online video games in enhancing their communication abilities, such as speaking and listening skills. The figure below shows their sentiments:

Figure 2. The Communication Skills Affected by Online Video Games

As mentioned in figure 2, 72% of the learners asserted that the use of online video games helps to enhance both the speaking and listening skills. 28% of the involved users said that only their listening skill was involved. The incoming graph presents detailed results regarding the informants who neglected the speaking skill.

Figure 3. The Listening skill based on age and gender

For a further in-depth understanding of the variance, explanatory lines from the informants, are quoted as follows:

"I use verbal communication when playing online, it is faster and more efficient, I believe, that is the primary reason, I am good at speaking and listening in English, I practice these skills regularly when playing online."

"As an introvert, I do not talk a lot when playing; however, most of the time, I am open to listening to my teammates talking to remain updated and tight on plans. I think this has improved my listening skill."

"At first, I had terrible speaking and listening skills; however, I was too comfortable when playing online, and I kept practising my bad communication skills. Today, I am much better than I used to be. Online gaming does help to enhance your English abilities."

"It did help me enhance both my speaking and listening skills. I am not sure if it is best to practice your communication skills online with non-native though, you might pick the wrong pronunciations."

4.1.3. Intercultural Communicative Competence

The questionnaire examined the benefits of an online game for improving intercultural communication skills. The majority of informants stated that online video games had a positive impact on their intercultural communication skills; as for the minority, they invested their reflections in the conditions of successful learning by the online game as follows:

"Yes, online gamers do learn a lot about the other cultures; most of us gamers in Algeria want to move to Europe, for better gaming conditions, and that's a result of our awareness of the external world, and other cultures which we learned from online gaming. However, this type of learning can only happen if the other players are from different cultures and are willing to be tolerant and friendly. To summarize, there is no exact answer to this question; it depends on the conditions I mentioned."

4.2. The Interview

The participants of our study were asked two questions from 7. They are primordial and significant to be analysed and discussed and mentioned a couple of answers word by word from our participants. They are as follows: Question (1): In your opinion, did playing online video games enhance your English communication abilities and your English grades, positively or negatively?

BGghost: "Hell yeah it did, my English is entirely thanks to online gaming, it enhanced it in a very positive way if there is a more positive word than "positive" then it would be"

Abd-el-Kader: "Yes, I was bad at pronunciation. I feel confident and comfortable in online video games; they helped me to speak fluently by using the terms of gaming."

Question (2): You previously mentioned that online video games enhance your communication abilities; in your opinion, how does that happen?

Wolf: "Consistency and efficiency, I spend 2 to 6 hours and up to 10 hours at weekends, playing online video games with other people, mostly natives from Europe and North America. You listen to them talk in a perfect accent, using slang and dialects, it's only a matter of time to be affected by them."

Imed: "By practising speaking and listening every day, it's not a phenomenon, it is just a normal way to learn and practice your communication skills. We learned Arabic from our parents and us as gamers, we learned from the people we encounter and speak to online. Of course, you are not going to meet a native English speaker every single time for sure, but you still learn from non-natives as well as you're practising with people from the same level as you."

Question (3): Do online video games help you develop your intercultural communicative skills?

BGhost: "Oh hell yeah it does, you get to talk to people from all around the world, and then the conversation sways from the game, so you start talking about random and personal stuff, they tell you about their countries, cultures, etc. That's, in my opinion, the best way to get intercultural communicative competence."

Question (4): As an online video gamer, what are the other skills, which we did not mention, that might be developed through online gaming?

Jalil: "Online games have way more benefits than merely spending time, or enhancing one's language, the exposure to situations where a human would not normally find himself/herself in actually teaches them how to deal with them in their daily life. There is also the fact that gaming gives you the ability to train reflexes and situational awareness; it also helps those who have difficulties talking to people outside such as the introverts and the ones who suffer from autism or depression."

4.3. The In-Game Observation

In the in-game observation, we based on communication abilities, age, and gender: we investigated (1) the identical antecedent dimensions of the research, (2) the effects of OVGs on EFL learners, and (3) the impact of OVGs on EFL learners' communication abilities and the intercultural communicative competence.

During the first matches, we noticed that all participants had good pronunciation and rich vocabulary. They know where they used appropriate terms in online games. By this, we have concluded that participants can improve their communication skills, and enrich their vocabulary. Also, participants showed great readiness for self-correction by retyping words that were misinterpreted correctly or by repeatedly expressing unclear terms.

Furthermore, during the 18 hours of in-online game

observation, we focused more on how players develop their intercultural communicative skills.

As predicted, the utilization of this skill was not possible at every single match. However, we involved the use of intercultural communicative competence more than we expected.

While participating in online games, we observed a conversation between players in the lobby. The participants chose to communicate for at least fifteen minutes before starting another game or match.

After observing what was going on during communication, we concluded that the two teams were excellent at communicating with strangers and making friends. They also showed great success in raising awareness, maturity, circulation and expression of their ideas. Also, they shared their lifestyles and culture in online games.

5. Results and Discussions

The results showed that the participants were fully aware of online video games use and their benefits to EFL learners. It is not just about having fun and wasting time. It is also about proficiency in intercultural communicative competence. There is also the potential of learning as well. Nonetheless, the majority of participants responded that they are very familiar with online video games. They answered that the online video games improved their English grades positively; as providing them with the ability to be more active and engaged in the English classroom. At this point, we assumed that there might be a possibility to use online video games as pedagogical tools to teach EFL and other advanced learners.

Also, participants reported that online gaming helped them in developing their speaking and listening skills, to a great extent, as well as the writing and reading skills at a low extent. Additionally, based on in-game observations led by the researcher, we observed that the players correct each other, i.e., if one does make spelling or articulating mistake, the other members would help him auto-correct himself/herself. Nonetheless, another observation we made is the fast pace at which individuals become friends and comfortable, with one another. As a result, players do end up having a long list of friends on their accounts, which eventually results in an endless set of pre-made matches. The subsequent results confirmed that online video games provide users with a comfortable environment. They help users to make friends all over the world effortlessly.

Through excessive communication with people from different backgrounds, online video games help to improve the participants' intercultural communicative skills and their basic knowledge of other cultures and nations; this means that online games and other virtual platforms are the only rational means to practice

intercultural communicative skills. We observed that age and gender factors, in online video games, are essential. They play a crucial role in acquiring knowledge to improve the effectiveness of intercultural communication, differently.

The results revealed that most men are interested in the funny incidents offered by online game providers; such as the dopamine rush stimulated by the excitement from the action or online adventure games or having quality time with friends. As for females, most of them are interested in learning and practising their communication abilities. Nonetheless, the data interpreted have shown that both males and females have the same amount of fun and general knowledge acquiring, despite their actual needs.

Besides, males showed more interest in using spoken words to communicate, while almost all females chose to use chat because they are shy and not comfortable enough to be heard. As a result, males showed a higher level of improvement in oral skills. As for females, only the writing skill was approved. We inferred that the differences in which females and males acquire to improve their communication skills differently through online video games are the extent to which the two skills are practised. Based on Figure 3, the females reported no improvement in the speaking skill. As said, logically, the less you speak, the less you practice; and the less you practice, the less you enhance. Likewise, the males reported nearly no alterations in their writing skills as they do not type in the chat often, which results in less practice, and fewer enhancements in their writing skill.

Furthermore, our participants, aged 17 to 19 preferred having fun to spend time with their friends. As for those aged 20 to 22, they practice their skills and acquire general knowledge. Accordingly, the results grasped from our research showed that the participants reported being affected by online video games at different rates. As a result, age plays a crucial role in developing communication skills; and the learning of online games positively contributes to the extent to which users acquire knowledge and improve the communication skills involved.

Including everything, age and genders factors affect the rate of acquiring and learning differently. Solely when the users themselves prefer to be less exposed to online gaming platforms or choose to be less involved. In other words, all users, of different ages and genders, learn at the same rate under the same circumstances. To illustrate, if a 30 years old female plays the same online video game as an 18 years old male, for the same period and using the same approaches of communication, with the same mind-set, both of these individuals learn and acquire a different set of skills at the same pace. Furthermore, age and gender factors do not directly affect the results of online games; but differ in acquiring knowledge and improving different communication skills from one to another.

Although the main focus of our research work is to

investigate the potential of online video games in enhancing the EFL learners' communication abilities as well as their intercultural communicative competence, we deduced that there is a long list of other skills that might be enhanced when playing on these platforms. The results indicated that most participants believe in the critical-thinking and problem-solving skills are the first necessary skills you learn when playing online. Finally, we conclude that OVGs offer users the possibility of forming reflexes and situational awareness; and this through excessive exposure to situations in which humans would not be, which ultimately teaches them the steps and suitable to do. Another benefit of situational awareness is that it teaches users the different skills needed in life, such as negotiation skill. Nevertheless, users can also unconsciously acquire and develop cognitive skills such as multitasking, improves memory and increases brain speed.

Despite the perfect image we portrayed so far regarding the effects of online video games, there are still conditions to be checked before the actual learning takes place. The rate at which EFL learners learn and practise their communication abilities is based on the game type. The involved players in the match, as well as the communication itself. The enhancement of the EFL learners' communication abilities, as well as the intercultural communicative competence, is based on how successful is the undertaken virtual communication; to illustrate, players do not depend on each other to win matches but solely on their performance, so players do not need to speak or chat with other players; and therefore, players do not speak or write in the chat which affects their communication skills, while teamwork and strategic online games respond via online to communicate with other players to win matches. Players are obliged to communicate with each other to win games, and as a result, their communication skills are practised. Therefore, the rate at which users learn and practice their skills depends on two main factors: the amount of connection that online video game provides and other players in the game or match.

Ideally, once the presented factors above are checked, a normal conversation in-game should be undertaken, in which learning takes place. However, even though we did not attend any of these trivial matches, the attendees responded that sometimes players could be overly toxic and hostile. It causes a reversal of learning from these players may be insulting or be unfriendly for no particular reason.

6. Conclusions

To sum up, throughout this paper, we have conducted a series of data collection sessions to determine whether online video games can be beneficial for our advanced English as foreign language learners at Abdelhamid Ibn

Badis University, Mostaganem. The main findings reveal that there are positive effects on EFL learners when using online video games. This swings from a series of cognitive abilities such as better memory and critical thinking to visible enhancements and alterations in communication abilities such as speaking and listening skills, and writing and reading skills at a low extent. We also unveiled how online gaming exposes EFL learners to different cultural backgrounds; it could be used to induce improvements in the intercultural communicative competence within our advanced learners.

On the other hand, the present study indicates that online gaming can also be beneficial in enhancing social skills and emotional intelligence. Nonetheless, we have disclosed the influence of the age and gender factors on our EFL learners as individuals, in which eventually changes the extent to which these individuals acquire skills and knowledge at different paces. It also suggests possible orientations in the current pedagogical tools and approaches used in *Langue and Communication* in the given context. However, it is a must to note that according to the analysis and deductions we arrived at, to have an optimal learning experience by online video games is dependent on the game itself, as well as the other involved online users in the matches. In other words, online video games are not a supplement pill that one has to swallow to gain knowledge or to enhance any skill, but it is a process of learning that takes time with pre-conditions with control.

The ultimate goal of our study is not to completely categorize online games as the ideal way to acquire and develop various skills, but rather to present it as a possible new tool for pedagogically used in the advanced EFL classes, such as "Language and Communication" classes at Abdel Hamid Ibn Badis University.

7. Study Limitations and Suggestions

The current study contains some shortcomings that should be noted for the sake of future efforts. Firstly, not all participants were helpful; the group was small. It was about 50 students from different levels of education, backgrounds and genders are not sufficient to be definite in terms of empirical works. Second, we have shortened in terms of equipment and time. Therefore, we could not design the most suitable online video game for the study; nor to test new vocabulary of learners in the academic settings, which left question marks on the validity of the

inclusion of online video games in teaching English courses. We suggest a larger population of different backgrounds and genders to facilitate the procedure of conducting the research.

To be more accurate and inclusive in terms of selecting participants. Besides, to investigate better the impact of online video games in the academic settings, participants should have computers, and provided with a pre-set online video game and sufficient period with strict notes during the courses. It will offer researchers a clear compromise when including online video games in teaching English as a foreign language.

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