



Kahoot as a Digital Game-Based Instruction for EFL Young Learners: Students' Perceptions

Melisa Khoyyiroh Harahap¹, Utami Dewi², Ernita Daulay³

^{1,2,3} Tadris Bahasa Inggris, FITK, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Medan

Corresponding E-Mail: melisa0333233013@uinsu.ac.id

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Abstract

This study explores young learners' perceptions of Kahoot as a digital game-based instruction tool in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. The research was conducted with 18 fourth-grade students (ages 9–10) at a private elementary school in Medan, North Sumatra, Indonesia. Most participants were at beginner to lower-intermediate English proficiency levels with varied digital literacy. Data were collected over a period of three weeks using observation and interviews and analyzed thematically. Findings revealed that Kahoot positively influenced students' learning experiences in several ways. First, it significantly increased motivation and engagement, with 14 students reporting greater enthusiasm compared to textbook-based lessons. Second, all students highlighted the fun and interactive nature of Kahoot, supported by visual and auditory features that encouraged participation. Third, 12 students emphasized its effectiveness in vocabulary and grammar acquisition, while half (9 students) reported increased self-confidence in language use. However, challenges were also identified, including technical issues, limited variety of activities, and stress caused by competition for a few learners. Overall, the study concludes that Kahoot can serve as an effective supplement to EFL instruction for young learners, fostering motivation, confidence, and language acquisition. Practical recommendations are provided for teachers, policymakers, and developers, along with suggestions for future research.

Keywords: *Kahoot, Digital game, EFL young learners, students' perceptions.*

Introduction

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to young learners in Indonesia presents unique challenges. The curriculum often relies on traditional teaching methods that are teacher-centered, grammar-focused, and lack interactivity. As a result, many students become bored, unmotivated, and struggle to internalize material, particularly in developing speaking and listening skills. A monotonous

learning environment can hinder children's natural language acquisition, which should ideally be engaging, playful, and exploratory.

With the rapid advancement of technology, the educational landscape has shifted, especially in the teaching of English. Digital game-based instruction has emerged as a promising instructional approach that integrates game elements into educational contexts to enhance motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes (Hamari et al., 2016; Kruk & Przymus, 2023). Grounded in constructivist learning theory, digital game-based instruction emphasizes active, student-centered participation where learners construct knowledge through interaction and problem-solving. Moreover, from the perspective of social learning theory (Bandura, 1986), digital games foster collaboration, peer learning, and observational learning, making them particularly relevant for young learners.

Kahoot, one of the most widely used digital game-based instruction platforms, allows teachers to design interactive quizzes and activities accessible on devices that can attract students' attention in learning English. Its colorful design, leaderboard features, and immediate feedback make it especially appealing for young learners (Licorish et al., 2018). Recent studies (Chen et al., 2023; García-Sánchez & Luján-García, 2024) confirm that Kahoot not only increases engagement but also strengthens vocabulary retention and collaborative learning in EFL classrooms. However, most prior research has focused on higher education or adult learners, while studies exploring young learners' perceptions remain limited.

Understanding how children perceive Kahoot is essential because their attitudes directly influence motivation, participation, and eventual learning outcomes (Dörnyei, 2001). As noted by Kruk and Przymus (2023), students' affective responses—such as enjoyment, confidence, or frustration—play a critical role in the success of DGBL. Positive perceptions can lead to greater internal motivation and sustained learning engagement.

This study was conducted in a private elementary school in North Sumatera with access to digital resources and openness to pedagogical innovation. Exploring students' perceptions in this setting provides valuable insights into the opportunities and experiences in implementing digital game-based instruction in Indonesian elementary schools.

Accordingly, this research seeks to answer the following question “What are the young EFL learners' perceptions of using Kahoot as a digital game-based instructional tool?”

The urgency of this research lies in addressing three key gaps. First, it responds to the need for more engaging methods of teaching English to young Indonesian learners. Second, it contributes to the underexplored field of students' perceptions of digital game-based instruction in elementary education. Third, it provides practical insights for teachers, curriculum developers, and policymakers in Indonesia to design more effective and motivating English learning experiences. By situating this research in the context of Elementary school in North Sumatera, the findings aim to inform broader efforts to integrate technology meaningfully

into EFL instruction for young learners.

Method

Research Design

This study used a qualitative case study design to obtain an in-depth understanding of young learners' perceptions of Kahoot as digital game-based instruction. A qualitative approach was chosen because it captures how participants experience and make sense of a phenomenon in its natural setting (Creswell, 2014). The case study design enabled close examination of classroom processes, learner-game interaction, and perceived impacts on learning.

The research was conducted in one of private elementary school in North Sumatra, Indonesia. The participants consist of 18 Grade-IV students (ages 9-10) who had prior exposure to Kahoot in English lessons. Purposive sampling was used to recruit learners who met inclusion criteria (currently enrolled in Grade IV and had used Kahoot in EFL class). One English teacher acted as a gatekeeper for access and scheduling but was not a study participant.

Ethical Considerations was obtained from the authors' university research ethics committee and from the school administration. Written parental consent and child assent were secured for all participating students. Participation was voluntary; students could withdraw at any time without penalty. Pseudonyms were used and all data were stored on password-protected devices.

To collect rich and diverse data, this study used several primary instruments:

1. Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were the primary instrument for exploring students' perceptions, experiences, and perspectives in depth. The interview protocol was first piloted with two non-participant students to check clarity and appropriateness, and minor revisions were made accordingly. Questions were designed to guide discussions about students' experiences with Kahoot as DGBL, aspects they liked and disliked, challenges faced, and the impact of Kahoot on motivation and learning. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility to ask follow-up (probing) questions based on students' responses, enabling deeper exploration of unexpected insights. All interviews were conducted with informed consent, audio-recorded with permission, and later transcribed for analysis.

2. Observation

Observations were conducted during three learning sessions (each 35 minutes) in which Kahoot was implemented as a digital game-based instruction activity. The researcher adopted a non-participatory role, occasionally engaging lightly to obtain contextual clarification without disrupting the learning process. Field notes were taken during and after each session to capture student

interactions, engagement, collaboration, and emotional responses. This systematic approach provided valuable insight into classroom dynamics and complemented interview data.

3. Documentation

Relevant documents such as lesson plans, digital materials used in Kahoot (quiz content, game features), and teacher notes on student participation (when available) were collected. These documents helped triangulate and validate findings from interviews and observations.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Data from semi-structure interviews, observations, and documents were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022). The analysis included familiarization, coding, theme development, reviewing, defining, and reporting. Data saturation was considered reached when no new codes or themes emerged after repeated interviews and observations.

Trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation (interviews, observations, documentation), member checking (sharing initial findings with participants for validation), and thick description to ensure credibility and transparency.

Credibility was supported through triangulation (interviews, observations, documents), member checking, and prolonged engagement (three-week presence). Transferability was addressed via thick description of the context, participants, and tasks. Dependability and confirmability were supported by an audit trail (protocols, coding memos, theme maps).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board. Informed consent was sought from students and their guardians before participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by using pseudonyms in reporting.

Limitations

While the use of multiple instruments enriched the data, certain limitations should be noted. The relatively small number of observations and short data collection period may limit generalizability. Additionally, self-reported data in interviews may be influenced by students' desire to provide socially acceptable responses.

Result

This study explores the perceptions of 18 young EFL learners (Grade 4, ages 9-11) in one of Private Elementary School in Medan, North Sumatra, toward the use of Kahoot apps as digital game-based instruction. Most students were at a beginner to lower-intermediate English proficiency level, with varying levels of digital literacy. Data collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and documentation were analysed thematically, yielding several key themes. Overall, the findings indicate that Kahoot as DGBL is positively received by the majority of students, though some challenges were also reported. Here is a table the result of students' perceptions.

Theme	No. of Students	%	Key Observation Notes
Motivation & Engagement	14	78%	Active participation, fewer distractions
Fun and Interactivity	18	100%	Clapping, laughter, peer encouragement
Vocabulary & Grammar Learning	12	67%	Recall of words, sentence use post-game
Improved Self-Confidence	9	50%	Shy students more active
Challenges & Contradictory Voices	5 (technical), 2 (stress)	28% / 11%	Internet issues, negative feelings about competition

Table 1. Summary of Themes and Frequency

1. Increased Motivation and Learning Engagement

A majority of students (14 out of 18) reported feeling more motivated when English lessons included Kahoot compared to traditional textbook-based instruction. They described the learning sessions as more exciting, with games capturing their attention and reducing feelings of boredom.

"Learning English with games is so much fun! It's not boring. I can't wait for English class." (Nr)

"When using books, I sometimes get sleepy, but when playing games, I stay motivated. I don't even notice when it's time for a break." (FA)

Observation details: During sessions, students often leaned forward, raised their hands eagerly, and competed actively to answer questions. Very few were distracted by side conversations, unlike in book-based lessons.

2. Fun and Interactive Learning

Students unanimously (18/18) described Kahoot as fun and interactive. They highlighted features such as scores, colourful visuals, background sounds, and point-based rewards that created excitement and healthy competition.

"The game has pictures and sounds, so it's easy to remember the words." (SR) (P1-P18)

Observation details: All students frequently clapped, laughed, and even encouraged peers when someone scored points. This interactivity helped maintain classroom energy and created a supportive learning environment.

3. Effectiveness in Vocabulary and Grammar Acquisition

A significant number of students (12/18) emphasized Kahoot's effectiveness in helping them learn vocabulary and grammar. The repetition of words, instant feedback, and visual support (pictures, icons, or animations) aided memory retention and sentence structure understanding.

"I quickly memorize new words because they frequently appear in the game. If I make a mistake, the game immediately tells me the correct answer." (AF)

Observation details: Students were able to recall vocabulary introduced earlier in the week and used them in short sentences during oral activities after gameplay.

4. Improved Self-Confidence

About half of the students (9/18) reported feeling more confident when learning through Kahoot. They appreciated the game's supportive environment, where mistakes were treated as part of the process, not as failures.

"In class, I'm afraid of saying the wrong thing, but in the game, I dare to try things on my own." (LA)

Observation details: Students who were usually shy in speaking tasks became more active in the Kahoot sessions, voluntarily answering questions without teacher prompting.

5. Challenges and Contradictory Voices

Despite positive perceptions, several students (5/18) expressed concerns: Technical issues: Unstable internet, slow devices, or frozen screens disrupted their learning.

"Sometimes the network is bad, and the game freezes." (DK)

Limited variety: Some students requested more diverse games, beyond vocabulary and grammar.

Contradictory voices: A few students (2/18) felt the competitive element caused stress when they lost points. One Grade 4 student mentioned,

"I feel sad if I always lose. It makes me not want to play sometimes."

These perspectives highlight that while Kahoot is engaging for most learners, it may unintentionally discourage some students when competition overshadows learning.

Discussion

This study explored the perceptions of 18 young EFL learners in a private elementary school in Medan regarding the use of Kahoot as a digital game-based instruction tool. The results show that Kahoot was largely welcomed by the students, who emphasized its motivational, interactive, and linguistic benefits, though several challenges were also identified. These findings both support and extend the growing body of research on the role of gamification in language learning for young learners.

First, the use of Kahoot significantly increased student motivation and engagement. Fourteen of the eighteen (14/18) students reported being more enthusiastic when learning English through games compared to traditional textbook-based lessons. This aligns with recent studies (Özdemir, 2025; Rahmadani, Saman, & Bahing, 2024), which found that Kahoot boosts learner motivation by turning repetitive language tasks into enjoyable activities. The observational data in this study—students leaning forward, raising hands eagerly, and staying on task—further reinforces the motivational power of gamified instruction in minimizing distractions and boredom.

Second, all participants unanimously described Kahoot as a fun and interactive platform. Features such as colorful visuals, sound effects, scoring, and instant feedback fostered active participation and peer encouragement, creating a dynamic learning environment. This is consistent with Maemanah and Shofiana's (2025) systematic review, which emphasized that Kahoot's multimodal design promotes not only learner engagement but also a sense of community through laughter, cheering, and shared excitement. In this study, students' clapping and peer support demonstrate how Kahoot can also enhance classroom social dynamics beyond individual learning.

Third, the findings indicate that Kahoot is effective in supporting vocabulary and grammar learning. Two-thirds of the participants (12/18) acknowledged improvements in word recall and sentence construction, facilitated by repeated exposure and immediate correction. Similar results were reported by Öztürk-Taş, Keleş, and Aydın-Yazıcı (2025), who found that Kahoot was particularly effective for grammar practice due to its capacity for repetition and instant feedback. The

present study's observation that students reused vocabulary in oral activities after gameplay provides additional evidence that Kahoot can enhance short-term language retention and application.

Fourth, nearly half of the students (9/18) reported improved self-confidence, particularly shy learners who felt safer experimenting with language during games. Kahoot provided a supportive space where mistakes were normalized and corrected instantly, encouraging risk-taking. These findings echo those of Gunawan (2025), who stressed that DGBL can empower hesitant learners by lowering affective barriers, though teacher scaffolding remains crucial to ensure a balance between competition and inclusivity.

Finally, despite the positive reception, this study also uncovered challenges. Technical issues such as unstable internet connections and frozen devices disrupted learning for some students, consistent with Gunawan's (2025) findings on infrastructure as a critical factor in gamification success. Furthermore, while most students enjoyed competition, a few (2/18) expressed stress or discouragement when repeatedly losing points. This highlights a potential drawback of competitive game mechanics, which may overshadow learning if not carefully managed. Teachers therefore need to adopt strategies such as team-based play, diverse game formats, and emphasizing progress over rankings to reduce negative effects.

At last, this study confirms that Kahoot as a digital game-based tool can significantly enhance motivation, interactivity, vocabulary and grammar learning, and learner confidence among young EFL students. However, its effectiveness depends on addressing technical barriers and managing competition to ensure that all learners benefit equally. These findings underscore the potential of Kahoot not only as a supplementary tool in EFL classrooms but also as part of a broader pedagogical approach that balances enjoyment with inclusivity and learning outcomes.

Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

The findings of this study suggest several practical implications. For teachers, integrating Kahoot into EFL lessons can enhance motivation and language acquisition, provided that technical readiness and inclusive practices are ensured. Policymakers should consider investing in digital infrastructure and teacher training to maximize the effectiveness of DGBL in elementary education. Game developers may also explore features that reduce stress from competition, such as cooperative modes or adaptive scoring systems tailored for young learners.

However, this study has limitations. The small sample size (18 students from one private school in Medan) limits the generalizability of findings to wider EFL contexts. In addition, the focus on short-term classroom observations does not fully capture long-term language gains. Future research should therefore include larger and more diverse samples, longitudinal designs to measure sustained learning, and comparative studies examining multiple DGBL platforms beyond Kahoot. At last,

the study highlights the significant potential of Kahoot as a digital game-based tool for young EFL learners while also pointing to areas requiring careful pedagogical and technological attention.

Conclusion

This study highlights that Kahoot, as a form of digital game-based instruction, is highly valued by young EFL learners at one of private elementary school in North Sumatera. Over the three-week implementation, students reported that Kahoot made learning English more enjoyable, interactive, and competitive, which increased their motivation and active participation in class. Importantly, ten out of eighteen students preferred Kahoot over Quizizz, suggesting that its real-time quizzes, colorful visuals, and immediate feedback foster greater engagement. Learners also perceived Kahoot as helpful in strengthening vocabulary and grammar knowledge while building confidence in using English.

Despite these positive perceptions, certain challenges were noted, such as the need for stable internet connections, limited devices, and the potential monotony if Kahoot activities are overused without variation. These findings imply that Kahoot should be integrated thoughtfully into the curriculum, complemented with other activities to ensure balanced language skill development.

Based on the results, teachers are encouraged to use Kahoot not only for vocabulary and grammar practice but also for formative assessment, as its instant feedback can help track student progress. Schools and policymakers should support teachers by providing adequate digital infrastructure and training on how to maximize Kahoot's pedagogical potential. Meanwhile, game developers are recommended to design more context-specific Kahoot content tailored to young EFL learners in Indonesia.

This study is limited by its small sample size and short duration, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Future research should examine the long-term impact of Kahoot on language acquisition, compare it with other digital game-based instruction platforms across larger populations, and explore its effect on different skills such as speaking and writing. In conclusion, Kahoot demonstrates strong potential as a digital game-based instruction tool that can transform English instruction for young learners by increasing motivation, engagement, and confidence, provided that infrastructural and pedagogical challenges are addressed.

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