

## USING MAINSTREAM VIDEO GAMES AS A LEARNING AID FOR TEACHING/ LEARNING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

EMPE Ekanayake<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The pedagogical approaches of Teaching English as a Second Language is a dynamic field of research given the importance of English in education, employment and in other spheres of activity. One such pedagogical approach which is relevant to teaching English in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is Technology-enhanced Language Learning which encompasses a spectrum of digitally enhanced learning strategies. Among these strategies, the use of mainstream video games for teaching purposes can be identified as a novel approach with endless possibilities for language education. However, research on this topic is extremely limited. Thus, this study explores literature on the use of mainstream video games as a learning aid for teaching/ learning English as a Second Language. In terms of research design, the study is a desk research which adopts the approach of a narrative review. As such, the study reviewed 19 scholarly publications in line with the main aim of the study. Next, the data was analyzed thematically to identify how mainstream video games are defined in literature, the benefits and drawbacks of using mainstream video games for teaching/ learning English as a Second Language, and the learning theories which support the use of mainstream video games for teaching/ learning English. The study found that even though theories on Critical Pedagogy, Multiple Intelligences, Language Acquisition and Motivation can be used to support the use for mainstream video games for teaching/ learning English as a Second Language, there are practical issues in adapting video games for teaching/ learning purposes. Thus, based on the review of literature, the study recommends further empirical research on the practical implications of adapting/ using mainstream video games for teaching/ learning English as a Second Language especially in actual classroom contexts.

**Keywords:** Education, ESL, Technology-enhanced Language Learning, TESL, Mainstream Video Games

<sup>1</sup>Department of English Language Teaching (DELT), University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka.

Email: [pavithrae@arts.pdn.ac.lk](mailto:pavithrae@arts.pdn.ac.lk)



<https://orcid.org/0009-0007-4604-7866>



Proceeding of the 3rd Desk Research Conference – DRC 2025 © 2025 by The Library, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka is licensed under [CC BY-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

Received date: 15.05.2025

Accepted date: 18.07.2025

Print Publishing Date: 31.10.2025

Web Publishing Date: 31.10.2025

## Introduction

Teaching English as Second Language (ESL) - in Sri Lanka or elsewhere - is a difficult task. This is because the language learning process is a complex phenomenon which entails more than just the mere internalization of grammar rules, sentence structures and vocabulary lists by students. Given the complexity of teaching ESL, research on English Language teaching pedagogy is constantly in a flux, with new approaches and methods being regularly introduced with the purpose of making the language learning process a smooth experience for ESL learners.

Among the approaches to teaching ESL, technology-enhanced language learning (TELL) can be identified as a relatively novel method with endless possibilities of enhancing language teaching/ learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to Hasumi (2024) and Marijuan & Sanz (2017), TELL refers to a spectrum of digitally enhanced learning strategies available to both learners and teachers in education. These strategies include “online learning, distance education, distributed education, virtual environment, learning management systems, the internet and web 2.0, massive open online courses (MOOC), synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning in e-learning, and flipped, blended, or hybrid learning” (Hasumi, 2024, p. 2). Thus, TELL can be defined as the use of digital technology inside and outside the classroom for teaching and learning purposes. It can also be described as an umbrella term which encompasses more specialized technological orientations to teaching like computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and mobile-assisted language learning (MALL). Mainstream video games, i.e. video games that are designed for entertainment rather than for learning in formal educational contexts (Kirriemuir and McFarlane, 2004), can be categorized under TELL since video games are virtual spaces with much potential for the teaching and learning of ESL. However, research on the use of mainstream video games on the context of teaching ESL is scarce. Thus, the aim/ objective of this study is to analyze and critically evaluate current trends of thinking on the use of mainstream video games as a learning aid for teaching and learning ESL.

## Methodology

This study adopts the approach of a narrative review. Thus, this study does not rely on predetermined research questions. Rather, it identifies, synthesizes and critically analyses data in order to offer insights on the use of mainstream video games as a learning aid in teaching and learning ESL. In order to find secondary data relevant to this study, a search was conducted on the University of Peradeniya library catalogue, the Jstor database and the Taylor and Francis database using keywords that were derived from the research aim of the study. Next, 19 scholarly publications were selected based on their relevance to the overarching research aim. The data was then analyzed thematically to identify themes on the use of mainstream video games as a learning aid for teaching and learning ESL.

## Results and Discussion

Based on the analysis of data, several themes on the definition of mainstream video games, benefits and drawbacks of using mainstream video games in education, and learning theories which support the use of mainstream video games as a learning aid for teaching and learning ESL were identified. These findings are presented and discussed in this section.

### *Defining Mainstream Video Games*

According to recent statistics, the value of the global game market is 231.6 billion dollars and there are more than 2.4 billion video game players worldwide (Bil et al., 2021). In Sri Lanka too, mainstream video games are a rapidly growing industry with the number of users expected to rise to 662,100 by 2029 (Statistica, 2020). Broadly speaking, all video games involve the processing of input provided by players according to a set of game rules and the output of digital information to one or more players (Kirriemuir and McFarlane, 2004, p. 6). And yet, despite this general description, there are many differences in the types of video games. One such major classification is “edutainment” games versus “mainstream video games” (Kirriemuir and McFarlane, 2004). “Edutainment” games are learning-oriented games/ software that supplement traditional learning. These games “borrow from game design” (Kirriemuir and McFarlane, 2004, p. 4), i.e. they are designed based on the general principles of video gaming, and are often categorized under CALL. The purpose of mainstream video games on the other hand, is purely entertainment. Mainstream video games can be classified as action games, adventure games, fighting games, role-playing games, sports games, strategy games, puzzle games and simulations (Herz,

1997; Kirriemuir and McFarlane, 2004). However, even within such classifications, mainstream video games differ in terms of the complexity of graphics, players’ interaction between gaming interface/ between players as well as the game narrative (Orwant, 2000 as cited in Kirriemuir and McFarlane, 2004).

**Table 01: Summary of differences between “Edutainment” and Mainstream Video Games**

	Edutainment	Mainstream Video Games
1.	Purpose is supplementing traditional learning	Purpose is entertainment
2.	Limitations in variety	Many categories of games like action games, adventure games, fighting games, role-playing games, sports games, strategy games, puzzle games and simulations
3.	Fairly simple in terms of graphics and players’ interaction with the gaming interface	Complexity of graphics, players’ interaction between gaming interface/ between players as well as the game narrative

***Mainstream Video Games versus edutainment/ CALL***

Scholars identify edutainment games/ CALL as an effective pedagogical tool in many learning contexts including teaching/ learning ESL. In fact, Ciornei and Dina (2013) identify CALL as effective since they create “authentic learning environments” which easily “combine and integrate” skills in a “single activity” (p. 250), while Embogama (2014) describes the potential of enhancing learner autonomy by allowing learners to “select and choose his/ her learning input without being bound by special and temporal restrictions imposed on him/ her in a conventional classroom settings” (p. 41) and higher exposure to the target language and higher learner motivation as advantages of using edutainment games/ CALL especially in university contexts. However, edutainment games/ CALL also has several drawbacks. These include the repetitiveness of tasks which can quickly disinterest the learners as well as poor game design that do not promote progressive understanding from one task to the next (Kirriemuir and McFarlane, 2004). Other drawbacks of edutainment emerge in comparison to mainstream video games. These are edutainment games’ inferiority in terms of visuals/ graphics and plot content; as well as the ability to recreate fantasy, challenge players and foster creativity compared to mainstream video games (Kirriemuir and McFarlane, 2004).

Like edutainment, mainstream video games also have certain weaknesses when attempting to implement them in teaching/ learning contexts. According to Kirriemuir and McFarlane (2004), these are mostly practical issues like the time it takes for teachers to familiarize themselves with the selected mainstream video game and to develop strategies to make use of the game for teaching; the difficulty in quickly identifying how relevant a game is to teaching a particular component of the curriculum; wasting of lesson time due to parts of the game which are not relevant to the lesson; and the difficulty in convincing stakeholders like parents the benefits of using mainstream video games as a teaching/ learning aid in education. Even though introducing mainstream video games to educational settings can be challenging due to these practical constraints, there are also certain learning principles embedded in mainstream video games which can be used to create good learning contexts in educational settings. In fact, Gee (2003) identifies 36 such learning principles which can conducive for teaching and learning. Some of his most persuasive arguments which introduce a novel perspective towards the value of mainstream video games in facilitating learners’ language learning experience are as follows:

- Literacy and Semiotic Domains

Traditionally, the term “literacy” meant written messages communicated through language. However, “literacy” can no longer afford to confine itself to its traditional definition as the ability to read and write since multimodal literacy, i.e. the literacy of images, symbols, graphs, diagrams and artifacts is becoming increasingly important.

Against the backdrop of this new definition of literacy, mainstream video games emerge as a semiotic domain – an area where signs acquire meanings or “an area or set of activities where people think, act and value in certain ways” (Gee, 2003, p. 19) - which needs to be contextualized and build meaning into. Since video games are environments for gamers to participate in experiences that requires mediation between various meanings, students learn actively rather than passively by deploying their meta-level thinking and problem solving skills.

- Identity commitment

According to Gee (2003), mainstream video games embody unique and “compelling worlds of action and interaction” to which the players make an “identity commitment” (p. 65). When learners make an identity commitment, it becomes easier for learners to “practice a myriad of skills” (p. 65) because the experience becomes more relevant and real for the learners. In other words, mainstream video games are useful environments for teaching and learning because they compel learners to proactively engage in the experience of learning.

- Situated Learning

Traditional language teaching methods like drilling and edutainment which define “mastering literacy [...] as a set of routinized procedures without being able to use these procedures proactively within activities that one understands and for the accomplishment of one’s own goals” (Gee, 2003, p. 66) can be ineffective since they are not contextualized/ relevant. However, mainstream video games provide the opportunity for learners to exercise their acquired language skills proactively through stimulating and dynamic activities because they “encourage and recruit situated, experimental, and embodied forms of learning and thinking” (Gee, 2003, p. 73). Thus, mainstream video games can be effective for teaching ESL because they simulate real-world scenarios and provide the learners with goals and objectives within the games.

- Social/ Peer Learning

Unlike edutainment games which are designed for individual players, mainstream video games can involve multiple players. Massive multiplayer online games like *EverQuest* and *World of Warcraft* where players use networks to seek and provide help from/ to other players, and exchange information involve rich social interactions which allow players to ultimately become better players. Gee (2003) argues that this type of social or peer learning which employs the principles of bonding based on “shared endeavors, goals and practices” (p. 212) can be very beneficial for learning.

Although Gee (2003) does not exactly argue for the use of mainstream video games in standard classroom instruction per se, his arguments are nevertheless insightful. This is because they signal the potential of mainstream video games of becoming learning resources which motivate learners to engage in the learning material with enthusiasm, leading to positive learning outcomes.

### ***Mainstream Video Games and Theories of Learning***

Even though the use of mainstream video games for educational purposes is a fairly recent discourse, a case for the use of mainstream video games in teaching/ learning ESL can be made based on several theories of learning. How these language learning theories as well as general learning theories support the use of mainstream video games for teaching/ learning ESL is discussed in this section.

- Critical Pedagogy, i.e. “Problem-posing education” and Mainstream Video Games

Derived from Friere’s *Banking concept of education*, Critical Pedagogy, i.e. ‘Problem-posing Education’ is a teaching philosophy which revolves around several key ideas: critical consciousness which espouses the ideal of praxis (critical reflection on the state of oppression and action taken to change that situation in a concrete manner), destabilizing the absolute nature of the roles of the teacher and the student, and developing ‘dialogical relations’ between the two parties instead. As a teaching approach, Critical Pedagogy challenges the traditional teacher-centered approach to education which “anesthetizes and inhibits [learners’] creative power” and “attempts to

maintain the submersion of [learners’] consciousness” (Freire, 1993, p. 250). This is because by “striving for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality” (Freire, 1993, p. 250), Critical Pedagogy creates learning environments which are more student-centered and liberating.

The significance of Critical Pedagogy as a teaching philosophy lies in the fact that it urges educators to evaluate teaching approaches and material based on their positive impact on learners, i.e. the extent to which the selected teaching approaches and material empower and raise the critical consciousness of learners. While there is a wide range of teaching approaches which are based on the principles of Critical Pedagogy, Kesler (2019) argues that the approach of using popular media for instruction can in particular empower the students. This because by including popular media like mainstream video games in teaching contexts, educators acknowledge that popular media is “part of the experiences that students bring with them [to the classroom]”, which serves to empower the students. Additionally, it can be argued that the use of mainstream video games for instructional purposes establishes a bilateral transfer of knowledge between teachers to students. This is because as popular media, mainstream video games are arguably a part of students’ as well as teachers’ lives, and teaching/ learning through mainstream video games is an activity which requires a partnership – a sharing of knowledge – between students as well as teachers.

- Mainstream Video Games and the Theory of Multiple Intelligences

Although the notion of intelligence has been defined and understood through conventional means like IQ tests, Howard Gardner (1983; 2000; 2006; 2011) posits that intelligence is in fact multiple because there are many different types of cognition. The types of intelligences identified by Gardner (1983; 2006) are verbal-linguistic intelligence, logical-mathematical intelligence, spatial-visual intelligence, bodily-kinesthetic intelligence, musical intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, intrapersonal intelligence, naturalist intelligence and existential intelligence.

This pluralist and comprehensive view of the human mind is a groundbreaking theory for many reasons. However, the reason why it is important for educators is the fact that it highlights the need for educators to adjust their teaching methods by taking into account the different cognitive styles of learners. Indeed, Gardner (2000) states that it is unfair for learners that “formal schooling often neglects multiple ways of knowing” (p. 32). Additionally, he identifies the use of technology in teaching as a way in which teachers can cater to the different learning styles of students:

“I call on educators to take advantage of this multiplicity of intelligences. Teachers should fashion teaching and learning so that *all* students have the chance to learn and demonstrate what they have learnt. [...] Indeed the process of using technology to mobilize the multiple intelligences of students has already begun.” (Gardner, 2000, p. 33)

Taking Gardner’s theory of Multiple Intelligences a step further, Capos et al. (2013) claim that mainstream video games are “useful supporting tools” (p. 221) of learning a particular target language because they engage with the multiple intelligences of learners. Indeed, Capos et al. (2013) argue that each type of intelligence as identified by Gardner is utilized by players/ learners as follows when they interact with mainstream video games:

**Table 02: Multiple Intelligences in Mainstream Video Games**

Type of intelligence as identified by Gardner	The manner in which the players/ learners use the type of intelligence through playing mainstream video games
Verbal-linguistic	Reading/ listening to guidelines, tips, instructions etc. presented through written and/or spoken language
Logical-mathematical	Solving problems/ puzzles which require quick mental reactions by the players/ learners
Spatial-visual	Recognizing shapes/ patterns and perceiving virtual space appropriately

Bodily-kinesthetic	Using controls quickly to respond effectively to the challenge of the game.
Musical-rhythmic	Tuning into the soundtracks/ background music to understand the game atmosphere/ mood
Interpersonal	Effective communication among players in cooperative games and online games
Intrapersonal	Engaging in self-reflection based on the themes addressed in more complex games

The above table demonstrates how mainstream video games make use of different cognitive and learning styles of individuals. Based on this analysis, it can be argued that mainstream video games have the potential to be used as effective learning aids/ material in ESL teaching/ learning contexts.

- Theories on motivation and language acquisition/ learning

According to Krashen’s acquisition-learning hypothesis, individuals have two very distinct ways of developing competence in a second language: *acquisition* and *learning*. “Conscious knowledge of a second language, knowing the rules, being aware of them, and being able to talk about them” (Krashen, 2009, p. 10) is called *learning or explicit learning*. Developing competence through language learning is vastly different from language acquisition. This is because when a language is *acquired*, the individual is not usually aware of the fact that he/ she is acquiring language, and is only aware that he/ she is using the language for communication. Thus, language acquisition is a subconscious process and is sometimes even called ‘picking up’ a language.

Related to these notions of language acquisition and learning, is the concept of motivation. Motivation is a factor identified by many scholars as important for language learning. For instance, Gardner (1985) states that the concept of “motivation” has “a clear link with the language learning process” (p. 10) and even proceeds so far as to identify different orientations of motivation like instrumental and integrative orientations. While learner motivation has been identified as important for language learning, it has been identified as less important than being in a deep state of engagement or “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Based on this point of view, Krashen (2011) argues that deeply engaging teaching/ learning material enable learners to acquire language more effectively. For example, Krashen’s (2011) “Optimal Input” Hypothesis postulates that teaching material should be both comprehensible and interesting for students to acquire language at the fastest rate possible. Moreover, his “Compelling (not just interesting) Input Hypothesis” claims that teaching/ learning material should not only be interesting but also *compelling*, which he explains in the following terms:

“Compelling means that the input is so interesting you forget that it is in another language. It means you are in a state of “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). In flow, the concerns of everyday life and even the sense of self disappear - our sense of time is altered and nothing but the activity itself seems to matter. Flow occurs during reading when readers are “lost in the book” (Nell, 1988) or in the “Reading Zone” (Atwell, 2007).” (Krashen, 2011, p. 1)

According to the above theories of language acquisition/ learning and motivation, engaging teaching/ learning material and teaching/ learning aids are crucial for the effective language acquisition of learners. In this context, it can be argued that mainstream video games have the potential to be powerful learning aids because the act of playing video games – similar to reading – can be an engaging experience for learners which renders even conscious motivation unnecessary.

**Conclusion**

While the use of mainstream video games as a learning aid in teaching/ learning ESL is a fairly recent area of interest in education, it is a pedagogical approach which holds a lot of promise especially in this digital age/ age of information. As such, the use of mainstream video games for teaching/ learning ESL is an avenue of research where there is much to explore. Yet, using mainstream video games as learning aids in ESL teaching/ learning contexts can also be difficult given the practical difficulties of adapting mainstream video games into classroom

teaching and the stakeholders like parents' resistance to the promotion of video games for teaching/ learning purposes. Thus, further research on the practical use of mainstream video games as a learning aid in teaching/ learning ESL is necessary to further understand the pedagogical implications of using mainstream video games for teaching/ learning ESL. Such empirical research can be conducted with the use of mainstream video games like *Bioshock: Infinite*, *Firewatch* and *Fibbage* with reference to ESL lessons like teaching narrative and descriptive writing as well as teaching vocabulary.

### Acknowledgements

The author thanks and acknowledges the support of the University of Peradeniya Main Library staff for their assistance in finding secondary data for this study.

### References

- Bil, E. & Kandur, H. & Ergan, S. (2021). New Consumers of the Digital Age: Game Players. *Prizren Social Science Journal*, 5, 9-22. DOI: 10.32936/pssj.v5i3.272.
- Capos, M.S.F., De Oliveira, K. S., & Brawerman-Albini, A. (2013). The use of video games in the teaching process of English as a Foreign Language. In *International Conference on Interactive Computer Aided Blended Learning*. 218–223.
- Ciornei, I., and Dina, A. (2013). The Advantages and Disadvantages of Computer Assisted Language Learning and Teaching for Foreign Languages. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*. 76. 248–252. DOI: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.04.107.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 24(1), 93–94.
- Embogama, S. (2014) Integrating Computer Assisted Language Learning in Undergraduate ESL Courses in Sri Lanka. In De Abrew, K., Abaysekera, N., & Jayasinghe, C. (Eds.) *Changing Paradigms in English Language Teaching*. Selected papers from the 7<sup>th</sup> International Conference of the Sri Lanka English Language Teachers' Association (SLELTA), (pp.39-46) Colombo: SLELTA.
- Freire, P. (1993). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New rev. 20th-Anniversary ed. Continuum.
- Gardner, H. (1983). *Frames of mind: The theory of multiple intelligences*. NY: Basic Books.
- Gardner, H. (2000). Can Technology Exploit Our Many Ways of Knowing? In D. T. Gordon (Ed.), *The Digital Classroom: How Technology Is Changing the Way We Teach and Learn* (pp. 32-35). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Letter.  
[http://www.msmla.edu/Include/learning\\_resources/online\\_course\\_environment/blended\\_hybrid\\_teaching/exploit.pdf](http://www.msmla.edu/Include/learning_resources/online_course_environment/blended_hybrid_teaching/exploit.pdf)
- Gardner, H. (2011). *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences (3rd ed.)*. Basic Books, New York
- Gardner, H., & Moran, S. (2006). The science of multiple intelligences theory: A response to Lynn Waterhouse. *Educational Psychologist*, 41(4), 227–232.
- Gardner, R. C. (1985). *Social Psychology and Second Language Learning: The Role of Attitudes and Motivation*. Edward Arnold.
- Gee, J. P. (2003). *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. Palgrave Mcmillan.
- Hasumi, T. & Chiu, M. (2024). Technology-enhanced language learning in English language education: Performance analysis, core publications, and emerging trends. *Cogent Education*. DOI: 11.10.1080/2331186X.2024.2346044.
- Herz, J. C. (1997). *Joystick Nation*. Little, Brown & Company.
- Kesler, T. (2019). Critical Pedagogy. In *The International Encyclopedia of Media Literacy*. Renee Hobbs and Paul Mihailidis (eds.) John Wiley & Sons, Inc. p. 1-10. DOI: 10.1002/9781118978238.ieml0043.
- Kirriemuir, J., & McFarlane, A. (2004). Literature review in games and learning. *NESTA Futurelab series: Report 8*. NESTA Futurelab.
- Krashen, S. (2011). The Compelling (not just interesting) Input Hypothesis. *The English Connection. A Publication of KOTESOL*. 15(3). 17.
- Krashen, S. D. (2009). *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*. Pergamon Press Inc.
- Marijuan, S., & Sanz, C. (2017). Technology-assisted L2 research in immersive contexts abroad. *System*, 71, 22–34. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2017.09.017>
- Statistica (2020). Media eCommerce: market data & analysis. <https://www.statista.com/study/124983/media-ecommerce/>