Game-based English speaking instruction for young learners

Chan-Li Lin[1], Fu-I Tien[2]
[1]Department of Cultural and Creative Industries Management, College of Humanities and Arts, National Taipei University of Education,
Taipei City, Taiwan
[2]Xizhou Elementary School, New Taipei City, Taiwan

Article Info

ABSTRACT

This study explored the implementation of a teacher-designed board game, "Castle of Dread", to enhance the English oral proficiency of sixth-grade elementary school students in Taiwan. Grounded in action research methodology, the study was conducted over nine weeks with 26 students, incorporating three thematic instructional cycles: clothing, leisure activities, and illnesses. The research aimed to examine students' speaking performance before and after gamified instruction, their motivational changes, and the challenges encountered by the teacher. Data sources included classroom observations, oral speaking assessments, student interviews, and reflective journals. Results showed that students demonstrated improved fluency and confidence in speaking, particularly among low-achieving learners. In addition, the game-based activities fostered higher motivation and peer collaboration. The teacher's reflective practice led to instructional adaptations such as scaffolding strategies and rule simplification. This study contributes to the growing literature on game-based learning (GBL) in English as a foreign language (EFL) context and offers practical implications for integrating educational games in elementary language classrooms.

Corresponding Author:

Chan-Li Lin
Department of Cultural and Creative Industries Management, College of Humanities and Arts
National Taipei University of Education
No. 134, Section 2, Heping East Road, Da'an District, Taipei City 10671, Taiwan
Email: chanli@tea.ntue.edu.tw

1. INTRODUCTION

English, as a global language for international communication, has long been a central part of Taiwan's education system. Since 2001, English has been formally included in the elementary school curriculum as a compulsory subject for fifth and sixth graders. In 2004, Taiwan's Ministry of Education issued the "Grade 1-9 curriculum guidelines for language learning area (English)", emphasizing the development of students' communicative competence and confidence in language learning [1]. The 12-year basic education policy launched in 2014 further highlighted core competencies. In the 2016 curriculum guidelines, three major competency domains were proposed: communication and interaction, autonomous action, and social participation. Language courses are expected to help students express and understand effectively in diverse contexts [2]. To comprehensively enhance national English proficiency, the Executive Yuan announced the "Blueprint for developing Taiwan into a bilingual nation by 2030" in 2018. The policy focuses on strengthening citizens' English proficiency and enhancing national competitiveness. The Ministry of Education subsequently initiated the bilingual nation promotion plan to invigorate language education and foster globally competitive bilingual talents. The policy emphasizes authentic use of English and active learning, encouraging interactive, task-based, and gamified teaching strategies [3].

At the local level, New Taipei City launched the "English Magic Academy" in 2008, offering enriched English learning resources for students in remote areas [4]. In 2013, five elementary schools began pilot bilingual programs, and by 2016, the content and language integrated learning (CLIL) model was adopted in experimental courses. By the 2018 academic year, bilingual education became institutionalized and later expanded to junior high schools in 2020 [5]. These efforts reflect both national and local commitments to building immersive and sustainable English learning environments that emphasize students' ability to speak, dare to speak, and enjoy speaking English. Despite policy advancements, practical challenges remain in classrooms, where teacher-centered instruction, grammar-heavy content, and rote memorization prevail. Many students lack opportunities for contextualized language use, particularly in speaking, due to low confidence and motivation. Scholars argue that creating interactive and authentic language environments is essential to increase learners' language output and engagement [6]–[8].

In recent years, board games have gained attention as effective gamified tools for language education. Compared to traditional lecture-based instruction, board games offer learners context-rich, interactive, and goal-oriented learning experiences [9], [10]. Through game rules, roles, and tasks, students practice target language naturally in challenging and collaborative settings, enhancing both language output and participation [11], [12]. Studies show that board games can significantly boost students' learning motivation and oral proficiency, while promoting peer interaction and teamwork [13]. Elementary students improved their English-speaking test scores and showed increased interest and confidence through board game-based learning (GBL) [14]. Activity-based board games create authentic communicative contexts for natural language practice [7]. Role-playing and simulated board game scenarios significantly improve engagement and speaking performance, validating the efficacy of interactive learning tools in language teaching [8]. While gamified instruction brings many advantages, it also poses practical challenges [15], [16]. In large classes, limited speaking time reduces opportunities for each student to participate. Students with lower proficiency or confidence may feel discouraged by fast-paced, competitive gameplay. Others remain silent during oral activities due to fear of making mistakes or language anxiety. Furthermore, teachers may struggle to assess individual progress or provide timely feedback during dynamic game-based lessons [15], [17]. While gamification can improve English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' motivation, poor pacing or over-complexity can increase anxiety, particularly among low-performing students [18]. Board games can reduce communication anxiety for some, but they are difficult to manage effectively in large classrooms [19]. Language anxiety and participation are closely linked, and only low-pressure environments promote oral expression [20].

2.   LITERATURE REVIEW
2.1. International trends in elementary English education
Driven by the increasing role of English as a global competency, many countries have introduced English language instruction at the elementary level as part of foundational education. This trend reflects a global recognition of the long-term academic and professional benefits of early language development. In South Korea, the Ministry of Education reintroduced a nationwide English assessment for elementary students in 2022, revealing stronger performance in listening and speaking over reading and writing, prompting renewed emphasis on spoken language instruction and curricular reform [21]. In Japan, English became a formal subject for fifth and sixth graders in 2020, with general classroom teachers tasked with delivering English lessons. However, widespread concerns remain about teacher training and resource adequacy, making teacher preparation a critical issue [22]. India's 2020 National Education Policy (NEP 2020) placed English at the center of its multilingual education strategy, emphasizing flexible and culturally informed language instruction at the elementary level to foster literacy and intercultural awareness [23]. In Brazil, recent literature reviews highlight that early English introduction in elementary schools enhances language intuition, communication, and global competitiveness, prompting calls for stronger legal frameworks and material support to ensure educational equity and sustainability [24]. A cross-national study surveyed 11 ASEAN countries and found that English is widely integrated into elementary curricula, often framed within multilingual policies that balance global language skills and local cultural identity [25].

2.2. Applications of GBL in EFL contexts
As education increasingly emphasizes engagement and active learning, GBL has emerged as a promising strategy in language education. In EFL contexts, games provide meaningful, contextualized practice that reduces anxiety and encourages spontaneous language use. Educational games in elementary ESL classrooms enhance vocabulary acquisition, oral performance, and cultural awareness, particularly when games incorporate cooperative tasks and localized content [11]. Serious GBL has been shown to significantly enhance EFL learners' motivation, engagement, and vocabulary development by creating emotionally

supportive, interactive, and goal-oriented learning environments [26]. A Q&A board game introduced in a problem-based approach and led to significant improvement in students' speaking fluency and attitudes over two instructional cycles [27]. Game design incorporating clear language goals, feedback systems, and task realism can deepen language learning, especially for elementary learners [28]. In rural Indonesian schools, role-play and game interaction effectively bridge the gap caused by resource limitations and low student confidence, fostering participation and learner autonomy [29].

2.3. Game-based English teaching: action research and challenges

Game-based instruction, when aligned with language learning goals and learner motivation, has become a key strategy in elementary English education. Action research offers a practical framework to evaluate outcomes while addressing classroom challenges in real time. A memory game implemented in English classrooms resulted in high engagement, though around 30% of students struggled due to language anxiety or unclear rules, highlighting the need for clear scaffolding and repeated exposure to ease entry barriers [30]. Teachers often encounter issues such as time-consuming material preparation, varied learner proficiency, and difficulty integrating assessment in game-based lessons, with concerns that games may lack academic rigor without structured planning [11]. Classroom challenges in both digital and physical games require better integration strategies, with attention to content alignment, age appropriateness, and class size management [31]. A vocabulary grid game used in a primary school action study improved vocabulary retention and learner interest, but required adjustment based on individual student responses [32]. Success factors for sustainable game-based teaching include professional development opportunities, culturally responsive game design, and feasible curriculum integration models, as empowering teachers to experiment and adapt increases the long-term viability of GBL [33].

3.   METHOD

This study explored the feasibility and effectiveness of integrating a self-developed board game, "Castle of Dread", into sixth-grade English instruction through action research. Following the cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, the researcher identified students' oral communication challenges, designed a targeted game, and implemented a nine-week intervention. Data from classroom observations, student performance, and feedback were analyzed to evaluate instructional impact and guide professional reflection.

3.1. Participants and research ethics

This study involved 26 sixth-grade students from a public elementary school. The sample size was determined based on prior action research in classroom-based language studies, where 20-30 participants are considered adequate for in-depth observation and iterative instructional analysis in a single-group design [34]. All participants had prior exposure to basic English instruction, and the classroom teacher also served as the researcher, allowing for continuous formative assessment.

3.2. Instructional design

The instructional design aimed to address students' low engagement, lack of confidence, and limited opportunities for spoken English practice. Grounded in task-based learning (TBL) and contextualized language use, it integrated with a custom board game to foster interactive, purposeful, and engaging learning contexts. The curriculum was based on the "Follow Me 8" textbook (Kang Hsuan), covering three thematic units: clothing (unit 1), leisure activities (unit 2), and illnesses (unit 3). Each unit was taught over three weeks, totaling nine weeks of game-based instruction using the "Castle of Dread" board game. Example target sentences included: *"He has a red jacket and blue pants"* (clothing), *"I like to play soccer after school"* (leisure activities), and *"I have a sore throat. You should see a doctor"* (illnesses). Activities included collaborative role-playing, vocabulary reinforcement, and task-based communication aligned with the learning objectives in Table 1. The game board and components are shown in Figure 1, which illustrates the thematic units through Figures 1(a) to 1(c).

3.3. Development of research instrument: design and features of the "Castle of Dread" board game

To address students' low willingness to speak and limited opportunities for language output, this study developed a custom board game combining English curriculum content with role-playing elements. The game was designed based on story-based and TBL principles and integrated language functions and vocabulary from the sixth-grade English curriculum, providing authentic contexts and motivation for using English. Development followed three integrated phases: needs analysis through classroom observations and student surveys identified a desire for interactive and fun learning activities, leading to an adventure and mystery-solving theme aligned with curriculum language tasks. The game adopted a turn-based group format

with materials such as character cards, quest cards, dialogue cards, event cards, and a map board, each targeting specific language goals. Pre-instructional trial runs with teachers and students informed refinements including simplified rule explanations, clearer task instructions, and added hint cards, ensuring a balanced and engaging learning experience.

Table 1. Game cycle themes and mechanisms

| Game cycle theme	Language learning objectives	Corresponding game mechanisms	Instructional intent
📜 Clothing (unit 1)	− Use "He/She has..." to describe appearance and clothing. − Use "How much is...?" to inquire about prices. − Describe character features and accessories.	− "Guess who I am": students describe characters for logical deduction and matching. − "Price tag boss": students draw clothing cards and guess prices. − "Labyrinth of dread": complete outfit missions by matching task cards and unlocking levels.	Reinforce vocabulary and descriptive sentence structures; create opportunities for spoken output in context-driven tasks.
🧍 Leisure activities (unit 2)	− Express preferences ("I like / I don't like"). − Ask and answer activity frequency ("Do you play...?"). − Make cooperative suggestions ("Let's...).	− "Castle sneak-in": students draw activity cards and express personal preferences. − "Dread express": categorize and describe various activities and locations. − "Boss is coming!": team missions involving cooperative suggestions and peer communication.	Encourage active interaction and peer dialogue; promote pragmatic awareness through meaningful exchanges.
🩸 Illnesses (unit 3)	− Describe symptoms ("I have a sore throat"). − Offer suggestions ("You should..."). − Engage in situational Q&A ("What's the matter?").	− "Boss's heart attack": fast-response game using symptom cards and correct sentence production. − "Detective chief": team-based diagnosis and responsive language use. − "Epidemic of dread": integrated role-play challenges using all sentence patterns.	Provide authentic communication tasks to promote full sentence application and responsive dialogue.

(a)

(b)

(c)
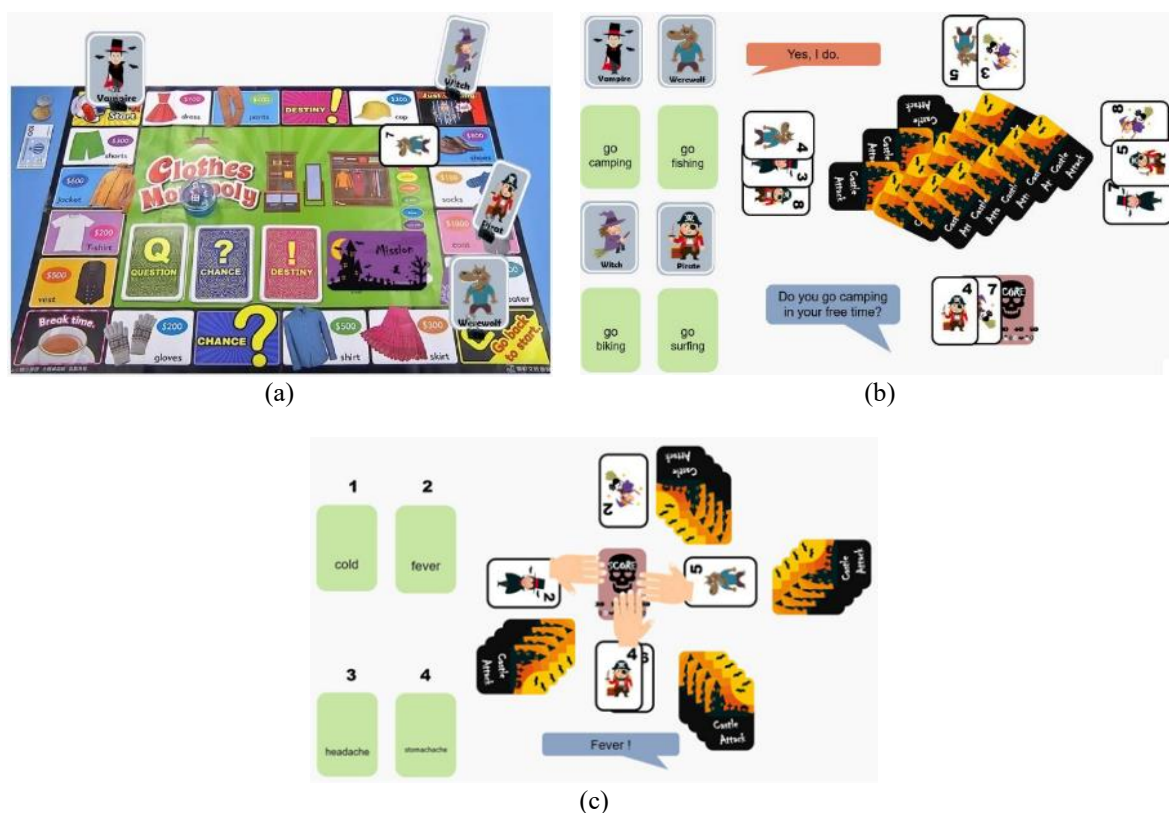
Figure 1. Game board and components (a) clothing (unit 1), (b) leisure activities (unit 2), and (c) illnesses (unit 3)

3.4. Instrument validity and reliability

The primary research instrument included a researcher-developed oral proficiency assessment rubric and semi-structured interview questions. Validity was ensured through expert review by two teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) specialists, who confirmed alignment with curriculum standards and oral fluency benchmarks. Reliability was addressed through repeated trials of the rubric in a pilot setting, yielding consistent scoring trends. Triangulation with observation notes and student self-reports further supported data trustworthiness.

3.5. Control of confounding variables

To minimize external influences, the study maintained consistent instructional materials, class scheduling, and classroom environment across the intervention period. The same instructor delivered all lessons, and pre-lesson scaffolding was standardized. Peer pairing and rotation strategies were used to reduce individual ability bias, and outlier behaviors (prolonged absence or disciplinary disruptions) were documented and excluded from key performance data to ensure accurate interpretation.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents findings from the action research cycles and analyzes both qualitative and quantitative data to reveal the instructional phenomena and learning outcomes observed after the integration of the "Castle of Dread" board game into English instruction.

4.1. Implementation and instructional adjustments in game-based teaching

Throughout the instructional cycles, the teacher implemented multiple adjustments and refinements based on student feedback and classroom observations. These changes not only enhanced the functionality of the board game but also significantly improved students' language output and interactive performance. The following examples highlight specific modifications and illustrative dialogue excerpts that demonstrate the effectiveness of the action research process:

4.1.1. Simplifying game rules and reducing linguistic load

In the first cycle on the topic of clothing, several students expressed confusion about the task rules, and their initial use of sentence structures was often fragmented. For example, during the "guess who I am" activity, students initially produced utterances like: *"Red jacket... big glasses... ghost number five?"* After introducing sentence scaffolds and visual cue cards, students began using more complete structures: *"He has a red jacket and big glasses. Is he ghost no. 5?"* This shift indicates notable improvement in sentence structure and semantic clarity.

4.1.2. Pre-task scaffolding for oral output

During the second cycle on leisure activities, students frequently gave incomplete or one-word responses to questions like *"Do you play...?"* for example: *"Play basketball..."* To address this, the teacher implemented role-play practices and distributed dialogue sheets prior to gameplay. Over time, student output became more structured and expanded: *"Do you play basketball after school?" "Yes, I play basketball with my sister every day."* Students demonstrated improved use of time adverbs and additional context.

4.1.3. Adjusting game pace and task roles

In the third cycle on illnesses, the original design of the "boss's heart attack" game was a fast-paced, competitive activity that caused some students to feel anxious and make frequent mistakes. An early response was: *"I... stomach... uh... hurt..."* The teacher modified the game to involve small-group collaboration and turn-taking. After the adjustment, students were able to produce more organized language through discussion: *"He has a stomachache. He should take a rest." "Let's go to the hospital card together."* These examples reflect greater structural accuracy and use of pragmatic strategies such as suggesting and cooperating.

4.1.4. Incorporating student feedback to optimize flow

Each week, the teacher collected students' reflection sheets and oral observation logs, using them to fine-tune rules, adjust task difficulty, and improve visual design. Additions such as mission hint cards and a beginner mode increased accessibility. Observations showed that lower-proficiency students became more willing to participate in later stages, producing complete expressions such as: *"Can I take this card? It says 'go to the kitchen'." "OK! I will help you. You should find the spoon."* These instances confirm that even language-anxious students can achieve effective output under guided and supportive gameplay conditions.

4.2. Changes in students' English-speaking performance and learning feedback

To evaluate the development of students' English-speaking abilities before and after the intervention, this study conducted three phases of speaking assessments. These assessments measured performance across three categories: sentence reading, short passage reading, and Q&A expression tasks. Each task was scored based on original score, fluency, and accuracy.

4.2.1. Quantitative score improvements

As shown in Table 1, most students demonstrated notable progress from unit 1 (clothing) to unit 3 (illnesses). For instance, Student 1 improved from 60 to 82, Student 8 from 74 to 81, and Student 10 from 76 to 94. Overall, more than 85% of students showed steady improvement across the three units, indicating that game-based instruction effectively enhanced memory retention and language output.

4.2.2. Fluency level gains

According to the five-level fluency rubric, high-achieving students (Student 6 and Student 12) consistently maintained the top rating, while mid- and lower-achieving students (Student 3, Student 8, and Student 19) showed progress of 1-2 levels. For example, Student 3 moved from level 2 to 4, and Student 8 from level 1 to 3. This suggests that the game-based context allowed students to gradually gain confidence and express themselves more fluently.

4.2.3. Accuracy and reduced errors

Students also improved in pronunciation and grammatical correctness during reading and Q&A tasks. For example, Student 18 progressed from level 3 to level 5 in accuracy. The researcher observed that most students began using correct verb conjugations and personal pronouns more consistently, while also reducing interruptions, repetitions, and semantic errors.

4.2.4. Student reflections and perceptions

Based on feedback forms and semi-structured interviews, several key themes emerged:
− Increased motivation and participation: many students noted that the game format encouraged them to speak up more actively due to its fun nature and task-based pressure.

> *"I used to be afraid to speak, but now I want to win so I keep speaking English!"* (Student 6)
> *"Speaking English with friends is less scary-we can help each other."* (Student 10)

− Boosted confidence in language use: students indicated that speaking English no longer felt like an exam but a skill to perform in an enjoyable setting.

> *"Now I speak faster in English-it doesn't feel stuck like before."* (Student 8)
> *"At first, I only said one word. Now I can say full sentences."* (Student 3)

− Interaction and collaboration driving language use: the need to complete team missions or role-play in the game pushed students to use more structured sentences in authentic contexts.

> *"We had to guess the character, so we needed to speak in full sentences to make others understand."* (Student 19)

These findings illustrate that GBL significantly enhanced students' speaking proficiency, especially in fluency and confidence, while providing a meaningful and enjoyable context for language use.

4.3. Teacher reflections and pedagogical adjustments

As an action research project, the teacher maintained weekly journals and observation notes, using ongoing reflection to make timely adjustments to game mechanics and lesson design. Throughout the process, the teacher transitioned from being a traditional knowledge transmitter to a designer of language tasks and a facilitator of student-centered learning. The following are three major areas of teacher reflection and corresponding instructional revisions:

4.3.1. Balancing language complexity and game rules

In the early design phase, the teacher embedded too many language goals into single activities, which overwhelmed students and limited their language output. For example, in the first cycle's "labyrinth of dread" activity, students were required to complete matching tasks and describe them within two minutes,

often producing utterances like: *"Red shirt... card... here."* The teacher noted in the reflection journal: *"Running tasks and language simultaneously was too cognitively demanding for some students. We need to rehearse the language separately before integrating it into tasks."* Adjustment: pre-task drills were added, such as character matching quizzes and sentence scaffolding worksheets. Students' expressions improved: *"He has a red shirt and brown pants. He is next to the map."* These changes enhanced sentence structure and clarity.

4.3.2. Supporting weaker learners and ensuring participation equity

In the second cycle's "castle sneak-in" game, the original design used a speed-based answering format that favored more fluent students and marginalized lower-proficiency learners. The teacher observed that Student 8 barely spoke during the session and reflected: *"Should every game have a 'language buffer zone' to give shy or weaker students a chance to speak?"* Adjustment: the format was revised to a group-based Q&A task with turn-taking, ensuring everyone had a speaking role. Later, Student 8 said: *"I play dodgeball... every Sunday... with my cousin."* This shift from single-word responses to structured expressions showed improved fluency and increased participation.

4.3.3. Shifting from instructor to facilitator and observer

In traditional teaching, the teacher usually controls the flow and correctness of language output. However, language in game contexts is more spontaneous, messy, and nonlinear. During the third cycle's "chief detective" task, the teacher noted: *"I was too quick to correct students' errors and ended up interrupting meaningful communication."* For example, Student 19 said: *"He have stomachache... he should to rest."* Despite the grammatical errors, the communicative intent was clear. The teacher later reflected: *"Allowing errors during gameplay is essential. Correction can happen afterward."* Adjustment: a "mistake review card" strategy was introduced post-activity to help students reconstruct correct sentences without performance pressure. This approach made grammar correction more acceptable and memorable.

Through classroom observation and student responses, the teacher developed a learner-centered, task-oriented instructional mindset that emphasized both contextual relevance and linguistic scaffolding. The role of the teacher evolved from a controlling lecturer to an observant facilitator, fostering professional growth and reflective practice.

4.4. Integrated discussion

The study's findings are consistent with prior research highlighting the benefits of gamified and TBL. Gamified tasks have been shown to enhance grammar-based language production and learner confidence [35] and foster fluency and motivation [29]. Task-based activities contribute to reducing language anxiety and improving participation [20]. Educational games can increase motivation and oral participation [36], encourage active engagement [37], and improve confidence, accuracy, and memory through peer interaction [38]. Reflective teaching practices that adapt game mechanics are key to addressing learner needs [39], [40], while scaffolding and positive feedback help lower oral anxiety [41]. Well-structured games aligned with language goals improve both vocabulary and speaking skills [42], and tailored tasks promote equity and achievement [43].

5. CONCLUSION

This study revealed that integrating board games into elementary English instruction enhanced students' speaking confidence, fluency, and willingness to communicate. Through repeated participation in interactive and task-based activities, students became more engaged and demonstrated increased initiative and cooperation during speaking tasks. The game-based approach fostered a positive learning atmosphere, where learners felt motivated to use English purposefully in authentic contexts. Teachers, meanwhile, benefited from reflective practice, continuously adjusting instructional strategies to better address students' needs and optimize the balance between language goals and gameplay.

These findings imply that well-designed board games can serve as powerful tools in language classrooms, promoting both linguistic development and social interaction. The study highlights the importance of aligning game tasks with language objectives and of providing differentiated activities to support diverse learner profiles. However, limitations include the single-class setting and the focus on oral language skills without examining impacts on other language domains. Future research should explore the long-term effects of GBL, its application in larger or more diverse educational contexts, and its integration with digital platforms or interdisciplinary subjects to further enhance student engagement and learning outcomes.

In addition to these pedagogical insights, this study makes several original contributions to the field. It presents the design and implementation of a custom board game, "Castle of Dread", specifically aligned

with three thematic curriculum units-clothing, leisure activities, and illnesses-to provide a cohesive, narrative-driven EFL learning experience. The research employed an action research approach that documented iterative pedagogical decisions, game design adjustments, and teacher reflections throughout a nine-week instructional cycle in an authentic classroom setting. Furthermore, the study combined student dialogue samples, oral performance assessments, and motivational feedback to deliver a holistic evaluation of language development, offering new insights into the effectiveness of GBL in elementary EFL contexts.

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Chan-Li Lin	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Fu-I Tien	✓			✓		✓	✓			✓	✓		✓	

C : **C**onceptualization	I : **I**nvestigation	Vi : **Vi**sualization
M : **M**ethodology	R : **R**esources	Su : **Su**pervision
So : **So**ftware	D : **D**ata Curation	P : **P**roject administration
Va : **Va**lidation	O : Writing - **O**riginal Draft	Fu : **Fu**nding acquisition
Fo : **Fo**rmal analysis	E : Writing - Review & **E**diting	

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
Authors state no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY
The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author, [C-LL]. The data, which contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants, are not publicly available due to certain restrictions.

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BIOGRAPHIES OF AUTHORS

Chan-Li Lin is an associate professor and chair of the Department of Cultural and Creative Industries Management at National Taipei University of Education, Taiwan. He holds a Doctoral degree in Education from National Taiwan Normal University (NTNU) and has nearly 20 years of experience in the field of education. At National Taipei University of Education, he also serves as the convener of the program in content curation and the program in maker education. His research interests include gamified learning, technology-integrated instruction, informal learning, and museum audience studies. He can be contacted at email: chanli@tea.ntue.edu.tw.

Fu-I Tien is an English teacher at Xizhou Elementary School. She received her Master degree in Curriculum and Instructional Communications Technology from National Taipei University of Education. Her work focuses specifically on the integration of self-made tabletop games into English teaching. She is dedicated to developing new English board games and promoting them in schools. She can be contacted at email: caintien@gmail.com.