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EXPLORING DIGITAL GAME-BASED LEARNING FOR TEACHING POETRY IN MALAYSIAN PRIMARY ESL CLASSROOMS: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

Nur Syahadha Bolhan^{1*}, Hanita Hanim Ismail²

¹ Sekolah Kebangsaan Tanjung Belipat, 98200 Niah, Sarawak, Malaysia

Email: p144428@siswa.ukm.edu.my

² Faculty of Education, University Kebangsaan Malaysia, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

Email: hanitahanim@ukm.edu.my

* Corresponding Author

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Abstract:

Poetry, though rich in linguistic and cultural value, poses notable challenges in ESL education due to its abstract themes, figurative language, and complex vocabulary. Digital Game-Based Learning (DGBL) has emerged as an innovative instructional approach to address these difficulties by making poetry lessons more interactive, engaging, and accessible for young learners. This systematic literature review aimed to examine the digital tools employed, the pedagogical benefits observed, and the implementation challenges associated with using DGBL to teach poetry to primary ESL students. A thorough search was conducted across databases including Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, and ERIC, focusing on studies published between 2019 and 2024. Out of 100 initially retrieved articles, 10 were rigorously selected for in-depth analysis following the PRISMA framework. Findings reveal that DGBL enhances student engagement, improves comprehension, increases motivation, cultivates positive learning attitudes, and supports language skill development through diverse, interactive poetic experiences. However, the review also highlights key challenges such as limited teacher familiarity with DGBL, a pressing need for targeted training, and varied student responses to game-based learning. These insights offer practical implications for educators and policymakers, emphasizing the need for effective DGBL integration and robust teacher professional development to support poetry learning in ESL contexts.

Keywords:

ESL Classroom, Digital Game-Based Learning, Poetry Instruction, Language Acquisition, Interactive Learning.

Introduction

Poetry, while rich in language and emotion, can be quite challenging for young ESL learners because of its figurative language, rhythm, and abstract ideas. DGBL has recently gained attention as a creative and engaging way to make poetry lessons more interactive and meaningful for learners. When used effectively, DGBL can turn what might otherwise feel like a difficult or distant text into an enjoyable experience that encourages exploration, imagination, and collaboration. This review aims to explore the kinds of digital tools used to teach poetry, the benefits they bring to the classroom, and the challenges that teachers and learners face when applying them in real settings.

As discussed by Ning and Ismail (2024) and supported by Davlatova (2020), English Language Education (ELE) around the world has increasingly moved toward technology-enhanced learning to promote active participation and improve proficiency. However, the success of these initiatives often depends on factors such as educational policy, economic background, and sociolinguistic context (Mudra, 2020). In Malaysia, efforts such as the Highly Immersive Programme (HIP) and Dual Language Programme (DLP) have encouraged teachers to adopt digital learning tools and learner-centered practices (Pirih, 2019).

Although DGBL has been widely examined in general ESL and higher education settings (Suk, 2017), there is still limited research focusing specifically on how it supports poetry learning at the primary level, where play and creativity are essential components of engagement. Therefore, this review seeks to address the following key questions:

- (a) Which digital game-based tools are currently used to teach poetry in ESL classrooms?
- (b) What are the benefits of incorporating DGBL into poetry instruction?
- (c) What challenges hinder the effective use of DGBL in primary school poetry education?

Methodology

This SLR was meticulously conducted following the PRISMA guidelines, ensuring a transparent and rigorous approach. This review aimed to synthesize existing research on integrating DGBL into primary ESL classrooms for poetry instruction. Specifically, the review sought to identify the digital game-based tools currently employed, examine the benefits derived from incorporating DGBL, and explore the challenges impeding its effective use in this educational context. Relevant literature was systematically retrieved from Google Scholar, ERIC, and ScienceDirect. The PRISMA framework (Onofre et al., 2021) guided the review through its four sequential phases which are, Identification, Screening, Eligibility, and Inclusion, each designed to refine the literature pool. Figure 1 presents a general overview of this SLR process, illustrating the flow of records from initial identification to final inclusion. The subsequent sections will detail each of these phases, outlining the specific steps taken to ensure methodological rigor. Data analysis employed thematic analysis (Shaffril et al., 2021) to interpret patterns and findings related to the research questions.

Phase 1: Identification

The Identification phase began with selecting three key academic databases which are Google Scholar, ERIC, and ScienceDirect. These academic databases are known for their extensive coverage of education, technology, and language-related research. These databases were chosen to ensure broad and reliable access to studies relevant to this review's focus on Digital Game-Based Learning (DGBL) in primary ESL poetry instruction. The overall search and screening flow is illustrated in Figure 1, which presents the PRISMA framework adapted from Onofre et al. (2021). To align with the review's objectives, a detailed set of keywords was developed, covering terms related to gamification, poetry instruction, and ESL learning.

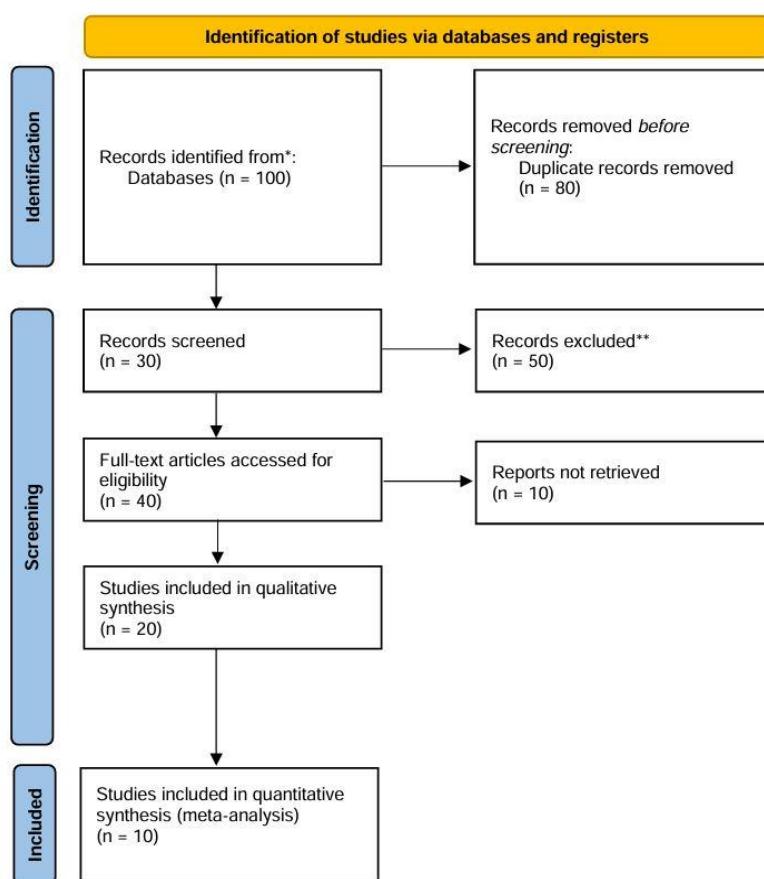


Figure 1: PRISMA Framework Adapted from Onofre et al. (2021)

Boolean operators, fundamental tools for refining database searches, were systematically employed to enhance the efficiency and relevance of the literature retrieval process. These operators allow for precise control over search parameters by combining or excluding keywords, thereby ensuring that the selected literature aligns closely with the study's focus. For instance, the “OR” operator was used to broaden search results by including synonymous terms such as “gamification in language education” OR “game-based poetry instruction in ESL”, thus capturing a wider array of relevant studies (Nakagawa et al., 2023). In contrast, the “AND” operator helped narrow the focus by combining core concepts for instance, “digital game-based learning in ESL” AND “poetry comprehension strategies”, to retrieve articles that addressed both domains simultaneously (Mudra, 2020).

This systematic use of Boolean logic contributed to a precise and comprehensive search strategy, as reflected in Table 1, which outlines the specific terms and combinations used across three major databases namely Google Scholar, ERIC, and ScienceDirect. The strategic use of varied keywords and operators across these platforms ensured that the literature search was both inclusive and targeted, aligning with the objectives of this systematic review.

Table 1: Terms used in the Search Strategy

Database	Search Terms
Google Scholar	TITLE-ABS-KEY (("digital game-based learning" OR "DGBL" OR "gamification in education" OR "game-based learning" OR "educational games") AND ("poetry instruction" OR "teaching poetry" OR "poetry comprehension") AND ("ESL" OR "EFL" OR "English language learners"))
ERIC	TS = (("game-based learning" OR "gamification" OR "digital games in education" OR "DGBL") AND ("poetry education" OR "teaching poetry") AND ("English as a Second Language" OR "ESL" OR "EFL"))
ScienceDirect	("digital game-based learning" OR "educational games" OR "game-based instruction") AND ("poetry" OR "poetry instruction" OR "poetry comprehension") AND ("ESL" OR "EFL")

This phase yielded an initial pool of 100 articles, which were then carried forward to the next stage for further evaluation of their relevance to the research questions.

Phase 2: Screening

In the Screening phase, the 100 identified articles underwent preliminary filtering based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria detailed in Table 2. This step was crucial for selecting studies directly relevant to DGBL in primary ESL poetry instruction, ensuring valid insights into tools, benefits, and challenges. Articles published from 2019 onwards, written in English, and appearing in peer-reviewed, indexed journals were included, guaranteeing recency and academic credibility, consistent with systematic review best practices (Kuchartz & Radiker, 2019). Conversely, studies published before 2019, not in English, or from non-peer-reviewed sources were excluded. This process reduced the list to 30 directly relevant articles, forming the basis for further analysis.

Table 2: Inclusion and exclusion criteria

	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Timeline	2019 - Present	Before 2019
Literature Type	Peer-reviewed, indexed journal publications	Non-indexed articles, magazine articles, newspapers, conference proceedings
Language	English	Non-English

Phase 3: Eligibility

Following the screening process, the remaining 30 articles proceeded to the Eligibility phase for an in-depth critical appraisal. This stage aimed to determine the extent to which each study aligned with the objectives of this review and met the established methodological standards outlined in the PRISMA framework (Page et al., 2021). Particular attention was given to the appropriateness of each study's research design, data analysis procedures, and its relevance to primary-level ESL contexts, particularly in relation to the integration of DGBL within poetry instruction.

To ensure transparency and consistency, a quality appraisal checklist adapted from Shaffril, Samah, and Kamarudin (2021) was employed. This checklist evaluated each study across three primary dimensions: credibility, referring to the soundness and validity of the research design and data collection methods; relevance, assessing the degree of alignment with the review's focus on primary ESL learners and DGBL applications in poetry; and clarity, which examined the transparency and coherence of methodological reporting. Each study was rated on a three-point scale which is high, moderate, or low. These are based on its performance across these criteria.

Studies that demonstrated significant weaknesses in two or more dimensions were excluded from further analysis. More specifically, the 20 excluded articles were found to lack methodological transparency, such as insufficient detail regarding participants, data collection instruments, or analytical procedures. Some also presented only theoretical discussions of DGBL without empirical data, while others focused on secondary or tertiary education settings, rendering them less relevant to the scope of this review. In addition, several studies lacked evidence of validity procedures, such as triangulation or data verification, which weakened their overall credibility.

By applying these appraisal standards systematically, only 10 studies were retained for inclusion. These selected works were deemed methodologically sound, contextually relevant, and analytically rigorous, offering meaningful insights into the digital tools, pedagogical benefits, and challenges associated with DGBL implementation in primary ESL poetry education. This eligibility phase was therefore essential in ensuring the credibility, validity, and overall rigor of the systematic review, ultimately reinforcing its contribution to the field of technology-enhanced language learning (Yuliana, 2022).

Phase 4: Inclusion

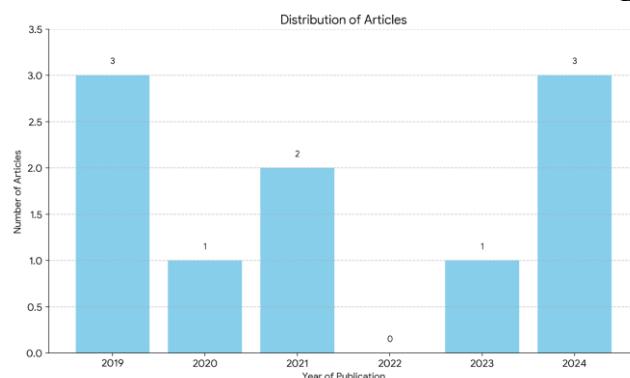
The final phase of the PRISMA framework involved the formal inclusion of 10 selected studies, which are detailed in Table 3. These studies represent diverse methodologies, educational settings, and technological applications relevant to DGBL in primary ESL poetry classrooms. The included literature, spanning experimental, quasi-experimental, and qualitative designs, offers multiple perspectives on how DGBL can enhance learners' engagement, comprehension, and creative expression in poetry, directly addressing the tools used, their benefits, and associated challenges. Their inclusion strengthens the reliability of the review's conclusions and enhances the generalizability of findings across diverse settings (Chai et al., 2021).

Table 3: List of Selected Studies

No.	Author(s) & Year	Title
1	Alhebshi & Halabi (2020)	Teachers' and Learners' Perceptions Towards DGBL in ESL Classroom
2	Karacaoğlu et al. (2025)	Evaluation of Yunus Emre Poems Designed as Digital Poetry with Web 2.0 Tools in Terms of Language and Values Education
3	Gamlo (2019)	Mobile Game-Based Language Learning Apps and Motivation
4	Irwanto et al. (2024)	High School Students' Attitudes Towards DGBL
5	Song et al. (2019)	Developing an Immersive Game-Based Learning Platform with Generative Artificial Intelligence and Virtual Reality Technologies – “LearningverseVR”
6	Ivgin & Akcay (2024)	Educational and Digital Games in Science
7	Moldagali et al. (2024)	A Meta-Analysis of the Impact of Innovative Poetry Teaching Methods on Reading, Writing, and Comprehension Skills
8	Hofmeyr (2023)	Attitudes Toward DGBL in Japan
9	Sun et al. (2021)	Review of DGBL in Primary Education
10	Westhuizen & Hannaway (2021)	Digital Play for Language Development in the Early Grades

Results and Discussion

This systematic review meticulously screened 100 journal articles, ultimately selecting 10 studies for their direct relevance to the integration of DGBL in primary ESL poetry instruction. To thoroughly analyze these selected articles, thematic analysis was employed as the primary analytical method (Shaffril et al., 2021). This iterative process allowed for the systematic identification and extraction of recurring patterns and key themes, directly addressing the overarching research questions: namely, the specific digital game-based tools currently in use, the observed pedagogical benefits of incorporating DGBL, and the challenges that hinder its effective implementation in primary ESL poetry education. The increasing scholarly interest in this intersection is reflected in the publication timeline of these studies, spanning from 2019 to 2024. Figure 2 graphically illustrates this distribution by publication year, showing a fluctuating but recently increasing trend in research output, thereby providing a comprehensive overview of recent research trends and highlighting the growing emphasis on innovative, game-based approaches to enhancing poetry learning within ESL contexts.

**Figure 2: Distribution of Selected Articles Published between 2020 to 2025****Main Findings**

The insights derived from the selected articles were meticulously categorized into three themes, directly addressing the research objectives which are digital tools utilized, their pedagogical benefits, and implementation challenges in primary ESL poetry instruction. This thematic organization revealed how tools like gamified apps enhance engagement and learning (Alhebshi & Halabi, 2020), highlight motivational and cognitive benefits (Gamlo, 2019; Ivgin & Akcay, 2024), and expose challenges such as limited teacher training and unequal technology access (Sun et al., 2021; Irwanto et al., 2024). Table 4 outlines each article's alignment with these identified themes, establishing the structured framework for the detailed analysis and synthesis that will constitute the main body of this SLR.

Table 4: Thematic Classification of Studies on DGBL in ESL Poetry Instruction

Themes	Main Idea	Supporting Studies (Author(s) & Year)
Digital Tools Used in Teaching Poetry	Innovative digital tools like games, stories, and metaverse platforms enhance poetry learning engagement and creativity.	Karacaoglu et al. (2024); Song et al. (2019); Moldagali et al. (2024)
Benefits of Incorporating DGBL into Poetry Instruction	DGBL increases student motivation, engagement, understanding, and achievement in ESL poetry learning.	Alhebshi & Halabi (2020); Gamlo (2019); Ivgin & Akcay (2024); Hofmeyr (2023)
Challenges in Implementing DGBL for Poetry Education in ESL Classrooms	Implementation is hindered by lack of teacher training, unequal tech access, and limited knowledge.	Irwanto et al. (2024); Sun et al. (2021); Westhuizen & Hannaway (2021)

Immersive platforms that integrate virtual reality (VR) and artificial intelligence (AI) offer highly interactive learning experiences where students explore poetic forms and meanings through simulation and dialogue (Song et al., 2024). Gamified learning applications such as Poems by Heart, Kahoot, and Quizlet enhance motivation and comprehension through

immediate feedback, points, and progress indicators (Moldagali et al., 2024). Meanwhile, Web 2.0 tools like PowToon, Animoto, and Canva promote creativity and collaboration by allowing students to design and share their own digital poems (Karacaoğlu et al., 2025).

When considered collectively, these tools highlight a shared pedagogical advantage: they transform poetry learning from a traditionally text-based activity into an interactive, multimodal experience. The reviewed studies consistently report that integrating digital and game-based tools increases learners' motivation, supports visual and auditory engagement, and deepens comprehension of poetic elements. However, findings also emphasize that effective outcomes depend on how teachers integrate these tools pedagogically which are linking gameplay or creation tasks meaningfully with language and literary objectives rather than using them as isolated activities.

Overall, the evidence suggests that a balanced use of immersive, gamified, and creative digital tools can make poetry instruction more engaging and learner-centered while promoting linguistic growth and creative expression in primary ESL contexts.

Benefits of Incorporating DGBL into Poetry Instruction

The integration of DGBL into poetry instruction shows great promise for addressing challenges in primary ESL classrooms. The main benefits highlighted throughout this review are summarized in Table 6.

Table 6: Benefits of Incorporating DGBL into Poetry Instruction

Benefits	Supporting Studies
Enhanced learner engagement	Alhebshi & Halabi (2020); Gamlo (2019)
Heightened intrinsic motivation	Gamlo (2019); Ivgin & Akcay (2024)
Improved academic achievement	Ivgin & Akcay (2024)
Deeper comprehension of poetic elements	Ivgin & Akcay (2024)
Positive learner attitudes toward language learning	Hofmeyr (2023); Gamlo (2019)
Stronger long-term appreciation for poetry and literature	Hofmeyr (2023); Alhebshi & Halabi (2020)
Synergistic impact on affective, cognitive, and behavioral learning domains	All studies combined

Across the reviewed studies, a consistent finding is that DGBL enhances learner engagement, motivation, and comprehension in ESL contexts. Alhebshi and Halabi (2020) reported that game-based strategies increase active participation and create more dynamic classroom interactions. Similarly, Gamlo (2019) showed that gamified applications can sustain students'

intrinsic motivation through elements such as points, levels, and instant feedback which are features that can easily be applied to poetry instruction to maintain interest and focus.

Beyond motivation, DGBL contributes to measurable learning outcomes. Ivgin and Akcay (2024) found that using varied game formats, including quizzes and simulations, promotes deeper cognitive processing and higher academic achievement. Such multimodal approaches are particularly valuable for poetry learning, where visual, auditory, and problem-solving elements help students grasp figurative language and poetic structure.

Positive learner attitudes also play an important role. Hofmeyr (2023) observed that extended exposure to digital games fosters more favorable perceptions of language learning, especially among students with prior technological experience. Together, these findings suggest that DGBL influences affective, cognitive, and behavioral domains of learning, leading to more sustained engagement and improved understanding.

Overall, the evidence indicates that when thoughtfully integrated into poetry instruction, DGBL does more than gamify lessons. It creates meaningful, student-centered experiences that strengthen language proficiency, deepen appreciation for literature, and support long-term motivation to learn.

Challenges in Implementing DGBL for Poetry Education in ESL Classrooms

Despite its promising potential, the implementation of DGBL for poetry instruction in ESL classrooms is hindered by several persistent challenges. These obstacles, though less frequently examined than DGBL's advantages, reveal important practical and systemic constraints that affect its pedagogical effectiveness. The principal challenges identified across the reviewed studies are summarised in Table 7.

Table 7: Challenges in Implementing DGBL for Poetry Instruction

Challenge	Supporting Studies
Limited teacher preparedness	Sun et al. (2021); Westhuizen & Hannaway (2021)
Insufficient pedagogical guidance	Sun et al. (2021); Westhuizen & Hannaway (2021)
Diverse student attitudes and backgrounds	Irwanto et al. (2024)
Systemic barriers	All studies combined

Teacher-Related Challenges

A central and recurring challenge identified in the literature concerns teachers' preparedness and pedagogical competence in integrating DGBL effectively into classroom instruction. Sun et al. (2021) reveal a pronounced gap between teachers' enthusiasm for adopting digital tools and their actual capacity to implement these tools meaningfully within pedagogical contexts. Many educators display positive attitudes toward using game-based strategies; however, their lack of theoretical understanding of DGBL principles often leads to superficial adoption, where

digital games are treated as add-on activities rather than as integral learning tools that align with learning objectives. Similarly, Westhuizen and Hannaway (2021) highlight that teachers who express receptiveness to digital play in language teaching continue to struggle with classroom management, assessment design, and integration of learning outcomes within game-based environments.

Moreover, both studies underscore a persistent absence of structured professional development programmes tailored to DGBL. Teachers frequently report feeling uncertain about how to select appropriate digital games, adapt them for poetry learning, or evaluate students' progress in game-based contexts. This lack of training creates what Sun et al. (2021) describe as a "pedagogical disconnect" between technological innovation and actual classroom practice. Without systematic support and capacity-building opportunities, teachers remain underprepared to design and facilitate DGBL experiences that promote creative and interpretive engagement with poetry—an essential component of language learning. Collectively, these findings indicate that teacher readiness is not merely a technical issue but a pedagogical one, requiring deliberate intervention at the level of teacher education and professional learning communities.

Student-Related Challenges

In addition to challenges on the teacher's side, learner diversity and individual differences further complicate the effective implementation of DGBL in ESL poetry instruction. Irwanto et al. (2024) found that learners' engagement with game-based learning environments is shaped by several personal factors, including gender, digital literacy, prior exposure to technology, and intrinsic motivation. Pupils who are more digitally familiar tend to navigate game-based tasks with confidence and enthusiasm, while those with limited access to digital devices or limited gaming experience often exhibit hesitation or disengagement. These disparities result in inconsistent learning outcomes, as some learners derive greater benefit and enjoyment from DGBL activities than others.

The study by Irwanto et al. (2024) also reveals that while many pupils initially respond positively to the novelty and interactivity of digital games, their motivation may decline when the games are too challenging or insufficiently related to the lesson content. This indicates that learner engagement in DGBL is not automatic but contingent upon the appropriateness of game design and its alignment with learners' linguistic proficiency levels. When viewed alongside the teacher-related findings of Sun et al. (2021) and Westhuizen and Hannaway (2021), it becomes clear that teacher competence in designing inclusive, differentiated game-based tasks plays a vital role in mediating these learner differences. Therefore, student-related challenges must be understood as interdependent with teacher readiness, effective DGBL implementation depends on teachers' ability to anticipate and respond to learners' varied technological and linguistic needs.

Systemic and Technical Barriers

Beyond the classroom level, broader systemic and infrastructural constraints also hinder the widespread adoption of DGBL in ESL poetry teaching. Multiple studies have pointed to a lack of institutional investment in digital infrastructure, limited access to reliable internet connectivity, and inadequate availability of technological devices, particularly in rural or under-resourced schools (Sun et al., 2021; Westhuizen & Hannaway, 2021; Irwanto et al., 2024). These limitations significantly restrict teachers' ability to implement sustained game-

based activities and often force them to rely on low-tech or offline adaptations that reduce the interactivity and immediacy of the DGBL experience.

Furthermore, systemic barriers also include the absence of clear curricular guidelines or assessment frameworks for integrating DGBL into language education. Teachers often report uncertainty regarding how to align game-based tasks with national curriculum standards or how to evaluate higher-order outcomes such as creativity, interpretation, and emotional engagement, skills that are particularly relevant in poetry learning. Institutional inertia and limited administrative support further exacerbate these challenges, as school systems may prioritise traditional assessment methods over innovative, game-based pedagogies. Collectively, these factors contribute to what Westhuizen and Hannaway (2021) describe as an “implementation gap,” where the potential of DGBL remains largely theoretical rather than practical due to systemic shortcomings.

Synthesis and Implications

Taken together, the challenges identified across the literature suggest that the barriers to effective DGBL integration are multifaceted and deeply interconnected. Teacher-related limitations in pedagogical and technical competence, student-related differences in digital readiness and motivation, and systemic constraints in infrastructure and policy collectively shape the success, or failure, of DGBL in ESL poetry instruction. These interrelated factors indicate that improving DGBL implementation requires a holistic approach: one that not only equips teachers with relevant skills but also ensures equitable digital access for learners and institutional support for innovative pedagogies.

To realise the full potential of DGBL in enriching poetry learning, stakeholders must therefore prioritise sustained professional development, learner-centred game design, and infrastructural investment. Only through coordinated action across these levels can DGBL move beyond novelty to become a transformative pedagogical approach capable of deepening pupils’ engagement with poetry and strengthening their overall language competence.

Conclusion

This review systematically examined the integration of DGBL in primary ESL poetry instruction, focusing on the types of digital tools employed, their pedagogical benefits, and the challenges that accompany their implementation. The analysis revealed that DGBL tools such as Kahoot, Wordwall, and interactive storytelling platforms have been effectively used to support pupils’ engagement, motivation, and vocabulary retention. Studies consistently demonstrated that the incorporation of game-based elements, such as competition, feedback, and narrative interactivity, enhances pupils’ enjoyment and deepens their comprehension of poetic language, rhythm, and imagery. Furthermore, DGBL was found to foster collaborative learning and creativity, enabling young learners to approach poetry not merely as text, but as a multisensory and participatory experience.

Despite these benefits, several persistent challenges were identified. Chief among them were teacher-related limitations, including insufficient pedagogical knowledge and confidence in using DGBL effectively (Sun et al., 2021; Westhuizen & Hannaway, 2021). Student-related challenges such as uneven digital literacy, differences in engagement levels, and varying access to technology further complicated implementation (Irwanto et al., 2024). At a broader level, systemic barriers, including inadequate infrastructure, lack of institutional support, and the

absence of clear curricular guidelines, were found to hinder the scalability and sustainability of DGBL initiatives. Collectively, these findings indicate that while DGBL holds significant promise for enriching ESL poetry learning, its transformative potential remains contingent upon addressing these pedagogical and systemic gaps.

Building on these insights, several directions for future research are proposed. Firstly, empirical investigations should be conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of targeted teacher professional development programmes aimed at strengthening teachers' pedagogical and technical competence in applying DGBL for poetry instruction. Secondly, future studies should examine learner diversity, particularly how pupils' digital literacies, prior gaming experiences, and cultural contexts influence their engagement and learning outcomes within game-based poetry environments. Thirdly, as emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) and virtual reality (VR) advance, research should explore their long-term impact, scalability, and capacity to create immersive poetic learning experiences that extend beyond pilot projects. Finally, comparative studies are needed to determine the most effective blend of DGBL types, such as quiz-based, narrative-driven, or simulation-based games, and their specific impact on poetry comprehension skills, including understanding imagery, rhythm, and figurative language.

Addressing these research directions will be essential to fully realize the pedagogical potential of DGBL in primary ESL poetry education. By combining technological innovation with pedagogical depth and inclusivity, future efforts can move beyond novelty to establish DGBL as a transformative, sustainable tool for fostering creative and meaningful language learning among young learners.

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