Speaking Snakes

[*1]Siti Faridah Kamaruddin, [2]Ali Siddiq Mohd Asmirul Anuar, [3]Amsyar Azmawi, [4]Lutfi Ali Abdul Hasnat Ashraf, [5]Muhammad Azimi Muhamad Rezo, [6]Muhammad Hazwan Mohd Fuad

[1]Academy of Language Studies, UiTM Sarawak Branch, Mukah Campus,

[2,3,4,5,6]Faculty of Plantation and Agrotechnology, UiTM Sarawak Branch, Mukah Campus

***Corresponding Author**

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ABSTRACT

Speaking Snakes is an innovative, gamified board game designed to enhance English-speaking fluency among Malaysian ESL learners in a fun, interactive, and low-anxiety classroom environment. Unlike traditional, lecture-based speaking activities, this innovation introduces a learner-centered approach that emphasises spontaneous verbal expression, peer collaboration, and contextual language use. What sets Speaking Snakes apart is its combination of real-time speaking challenges and game mechanics, which include movement-based gameplay, prompt cards from "Surprise" and "Punishment" boxes and turn-based interaction to stimulate speaking practice in authentic and engaging ways. Aligned with modern educational frameworks such as the SAMR model and Gamification Acceptance Model (GAM), Speaking Snakes encourages meaningful communication while promoting vocabulary development, listening skills, and speaking fluency. It is easy to learn, adaptable to various age groups and proficiency levels, and offers a flexible learning experience suited to different classroom settings. This tool supports key educational goals by fostering motivation, reducing fear of making mistakes, and enabling students to enjoy speaking without pressure. Feedback from users confirms its perceived usefulness and ease of use, highlighting improvements in fluency, confidence, and language engagement. With strong commercial potential, Speaking Snakes represents a scalable solution that could be implemented widely in ESL classrooms across diverse educational contexts. This innovation not only redefines how speaking is taught but also empowers learners to communicate more effectively and confidently in English.

Keywords: board game; gamification; perceived ease of use; perceived usefulness; speaking skills

INTRODUCTION

Most language learners in Malaysia have undergone 11 years of compulsory language learning: six years in primary and five years in secondary school. When they entered the tertiary education level, they continued their language education for 2.5 years at the diploma level and three years at the degree level. Some students even question the necessity of repeating the same English lessons. Despite the long language learning period and overconfidence some students feel, speaking English is still a struggle for many. Most learners consider speaking skills one of the most complex language learning skills, and expressing themselves in spoken English feels difficult (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). The students did not dare to speak English in class for many reasons, such as being afraid of mistakes, lacking vocabulary, and lacking confidence. To make things worse, schools often prioritise writing over speaking, providing students with limited opportunities to apply the language in authentic settings (Azhar & Gopal, 2021). A learner's language proficiency can be estimated by his/her speaking fluency. There are three integral aspects of speaking fluency: pauses, speed, and repairs (Bosker et al., 2012).

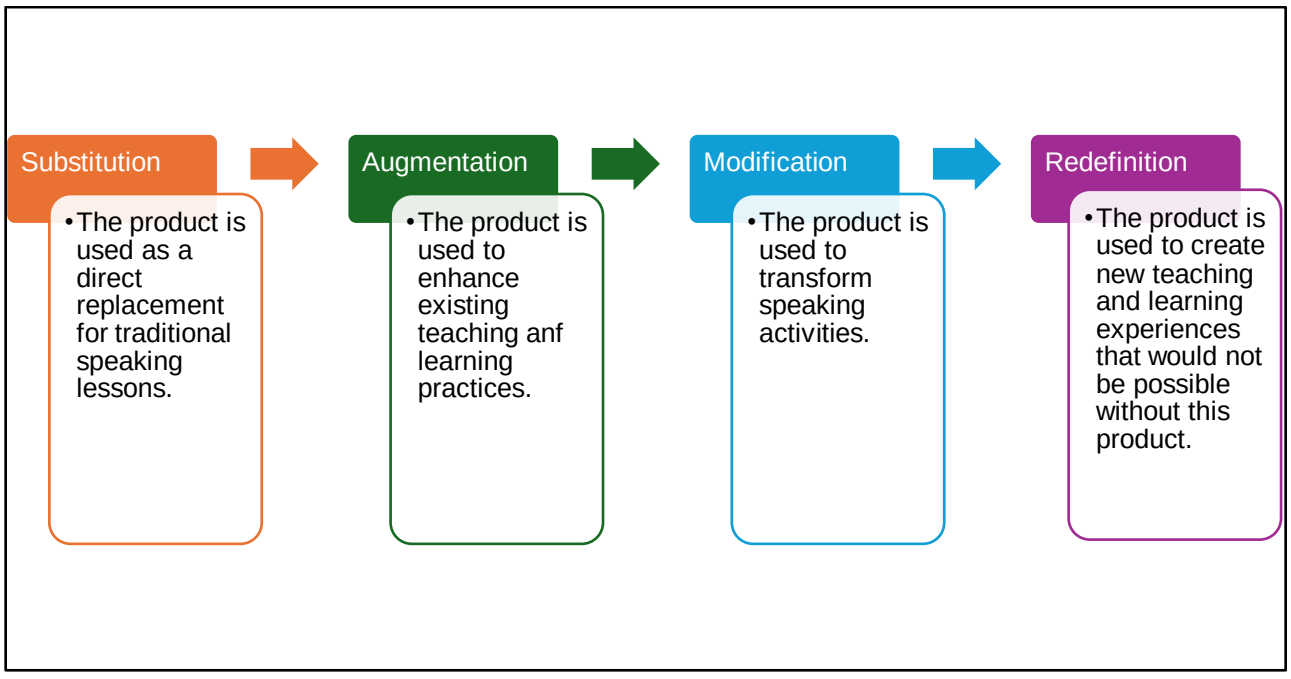
Speaking fluency can be improved by applying the cognitive-communicative approach in educational settings. This approach can be interpreted as real-life communication, enhancing pragmatic and linguistic competence (Gorkaltseva & Nagel, 2015). Other than real-life communication, the renowned educational psychologist

Piaget (2001; as cited in Kaur & Abdul Aziz, 2020) stated that movement produces 'thought' which initiates the learning process, and the responsible joint that builds up the cognitive frame is the movement, not consciousness. Considering the speaking problems most Malaysian ESL learners face, "Speaking Snakes" is designed to assist them in speaking fluently in an engaging and interactive learning environment. Educators can provide a less threatening environment for students to speak freely by integrating gamification in language classrooms. At the same time, they can enjoy speaking activities with their classmates to promote peer learning. By integrating physical board game such as Speaking Snakes, there are three main advantages of using language games in ESL speaking classroom according to Savigon and Bern (1987; as cited in Kaur & Abdul Aziz, 2020) which are: (1) students can use the language directly rather than just practising in classroom context; (2) students can interact with each other using the target language; and (3) language educators can create a stress-free environment.

Previous studies have also proven that board games cause a significant improve fluency. Students' speech fluency showed huge progression as their speed of speech production was maximized (Kumalasari et al., 2020), grammatical accuracy was increased (Pham et al., 2020), and they could further elaborate on their points of view (Pratiwi & Mukminan, 2018). Students could understand the conversation, respond to their peers using comprehensible speech (Arfani & Sulistia, 2019), and express their opinions without hindrances (Putri et al., 2017). Halts, repetitions, fillers, and sentence fragments were reduced in speech, and minor grammatical errors and language limitations did not impede communication.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework for implementing this product into traditional speaking lessons. The SAMR model was developed by Puentedura (2006) to select, use, and evaluate technology in classrooms. In 2013, Puentedura categorised substitution and augmentation levels as enhancement and modification and redefined the transformation levels. This model allows the technology selected for the language classroom to be analysed regarding its usage and impact on language learning. In this case, "Speaking Snakes" was introduced as a technology for speaking lessons. Students used "Speaking Snakes" at the Substitution level to replace traditional speaking methodologies like repeating after the teacher, memorising a dialogue, or responding to speaking drills (Richards, 2008, p. 2). At the Augmentation level, students were expected to be in immersive learning as they responded to prompt cards from either the Surprise Box or the Punishment Box. At the Modification level, students worked collaboratively to win the game. At the final stage of Redefinition, students must reflect on their experience while using "Speaking Snakes" and share their reflections in front of their classmates.

Figure 1. SAMR Model (Puentedura, 2006, 2013).



METHODOLOGY

This quantitative study also applies classroom action research to identify the efficacy of Speaking Snakes, a newly designed board game, in improving speaking fluency. The target sample for this study consisted of 29 non-English major students at a local public university in Sarawak. A questionnaire was distributed to the students right after they tried Speaking Snakes. The questionnaire statements were adopted and adapted from Ab. Rahman et al.'s (2018) previous study. The questionnaire was divided into three parts: (1) demographic items, including gender and age; (2) Gamification perceived usefulness (GPU); and (3) Gamification perceived ease of use (GPEU). All statements were assessed using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1, which indicates strongly disagree, to 5, which implies strongly agree. The original number of statements is 18, but only 10 were used. Variables such as attitude and student engagement were omitted from the feedback form because this study was only concerned with the perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use of this newly designed board game.

In the Speaking Snakes study, Gamification Perceived Usefulness (GPU) and Gamification Perceived Ease of Use (GPEU) were operationalised based on the Gamification Acceptance Model (GAM) by Ab. Rahman et al. (2018), which adapts Davis's (1989) Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) for educational gamification contexts. Both constructs were measured using a quantitative questionnaire distributed after the gameplay session. The questionnaire consisted of 10 statements adapted from Ab. Rahman et al. (2018), rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). Five items measured GPU (refer to Table 3 below) and five assessed GPEU (refer to Table 4 below). High mean scores across both constructs indicated that students found the game beneficial, engaging, and user-friendly, validating its perceived educational value and usability in promoting speaking fluency.

A pre-test and post-test design would not be suitable for this study because its primary aim was to explore students' perceptions of usefulness and ease of use of the Speaking Snakes game, not to measure measurable gains in speaking proficiency. The data collected were perception-based, relying on self-reported responses through a Likert-scale questionnaire adapted from Ab. Rahman et al. (2018), rather than performance-based assessments. Moreover, the activity was a single, short-term intervention, making it unrealistic to detect significant linguistic improvement within such a limited time frame (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study's Gamification Acceptance Model (GAM) framework focuses on learners' attitudes and behavioural intentions rather than pre/post cognitive gains. Hence, a cross-sectional survey design is more appropriate for capturing students' immediate perceptions of gamification's impact on their motivation and engagement (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010; Richards, 2008).

The materials needed to play Speaking Snakes are a board game, tokens, dice, and two prompt cards labelled Surprise Box and Punishment Box. The steps to play Speaking Snakes are as follows:

1. There will be two teams playing one board game. However, the game is played individually.
2. Dice will be used to decide where the player's chosen token will land.
3. After the player moves his/her token, he/she will have to choose one piece of paper from a Surprise Box to play the game of description, where the player will respond to the speaking topic on the prompt card. If the player is uncomfortable with the speaking topic, they can skip it once.
4. The other players from the opposing team will have to listen attentively to the player whose turn it is to speak.
5. If one of the players gets eaten by a snake, the player will have to roll from the Punishment Box and describe what the animal looks like or make a sound of the animal based on the prompt card. The description is written on the paper as punishment.
6. The individual winner is decided by who is the first to finish the finish line on the board.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings from the implementation of this language game product are discussed in this section. There are 29 (7 males, 22 females) students who participated in this game with the assistance of five students (all male) as

facilitators. However, when the questionnaire was distributed after the game session, only seven students responded voluntarily, with a response rate of only 24.14%.

Table 1. The genders of participants.

	Frequency	**Percent (%)**
Male	1	14.3
Female	6	85.7
Total	7	100

Based on Table 1, the overall seven participants who responded to the questionnaire after playing the game were one male participant (14.3%) and six female participants (85.7%). Thus, most participants who responded to the feedback form after playing the game were female students.

Table 2. The age of participants.

	Frequency	**Percent (%)**
18 years old	4	57.1
19 years old	3	42.9
Total	7	100

Table 2 showed that four participants were 18 (57.1%) and three were 19 (42.9%). Hence, the age of participants who gave feedback after playing the game was among 18 to 19-year-olds. Based on the age of the participants and the facilitators of this game, this adds to the novelty of Speaking Snakes because students prepared the game for students. Five game designers are mostly 18-year-olds, and they prepared this product with the supervision of an English language lecturer. These game designers understand the needs of other students from their generation who have never known a world without video games, smartphones, and the internet. Thus, this product is not simply designed by an educator without considering students' needs for a language game, which was later handed to students to play because not all games are created equal (Maloney, 2019).

Furthermore, students' acceptance of the integration of gamification, such as Speaking Snakes in the speaking lesson, was explored using the Gamification Acceptance Model (GAM) proposed by Ab. Rahman et al (2018). GAM was developed based on Davis's (1989) Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). Gamification perceived usefulness (GPU) and gamification perceived ease of use (GPEU) influence the students' attitude towards gamification. The students' attitude towards gamification affects their engagement during classroom activities. The students' engagement consists of skill engagement and interaction engagement. Finally, if the students are more engaged during lessons, their knowledge will increase, improving their learning performance.

Based on the high mean score on statement GPU5, it signifies that injecting the element of fun is undeniable in promoting students' speaking fluency. This deals with the affective state of learners in language learning. People are sociable beings and relish being in a team where they can interact with everyone willing to communicate. In trying to communicate specific ideas, they are forced to use the target language (Gajdos & Korpas, 2020). Games can promise full participation of students in the classroom because it is fun, and they can enjoy while learning (Mahmoud & Tanni, 2014). Everyone loves to win, so integrating a game into a language lesson can develop a healthy competitive platform for students to speak English. According to Mubaslat (2012), games can motivate learners to study English because they have the combination of challenge and amusement at the same time. The motivation in students develops when they want to be the ones who complete the task earlier than anyone to win the game (Mubaslat, 2012). Thus, they would have healthy competition that would push them to perform the task using English. Language instructors also believe that

language games promote enjoyment and fun in the classroom (Hang, 2017; Dewi et al., 2017; Al-Masri & Al-Najar, 2014). On the other hand, students expressed that board games improved their fluency in speaking as they enjoyed playing the games and forgot their fear of making errors in their speech (Maqfirah, 2018; Suhardiyati et al., 2018).

Apart from that, having a fun speaking lesson with the application of games such as Speaking Snakes not only encourage students to speak freely in classrooms, but it would also train students to listen to their friends' responses attentively and they can also learn new knowledge from their friends based on what they know from their sharing session. Through board games, students are exposed to ideas and opinions given by their peers (Mangaleswaran & Abdul Aziz, 2019; Barton et al., 2018). They listen and learn from their group members' points of view, which helps them to monitor their speaking progress and improve their speaking competence. Additionally, some board games connect to real-life circumstances, allowing pupils to freely share their thoughts and ideas in the target language (Annisa & Nst, 2020). This assists pupils to be more flexible in the real world and develop their social skills. Although listening is a skill that can be paired up with speaking, integrating language games in spoken lessons does not guarantee the improvement of listening performance, as Hwang et al. (2015) proved. The main reason for such a finding is that students could not easily identify words in sentences spoken aloud by peers without contextual support. Without being told in what context cards were designed, students had no clues of the context to help them finish a game.

Judging by the lowest mean score for the GPU1 statement, the participants in this study believed that there are other effective ways, other than integrating language games, to improve students' speaking fluency. This finding supports the earlier study, such as Gajdos and Korpas (2020), whereby language games are only a supplement to speaking lessons, and it would be effective to combine the speaking board game with other various materials (Hidayatullah & Haerazi, 2021). The complementary nature of language games should be understood as it can assist L2 learners who are having the most difficulty in speaking the language fluently because of the complexity of putting together the units within a time constraint (Jong, 2016; as cited in Gajdos & Korpas, 2020). Regarding teaching it, Simensen (2010; as cited in Gajdos & Korpas, 2020) discusses the importance of using small words and short phrases and working up to more extended sequences in order to reach fluency. Besides that, language educators can refer to some helpful frameworks such as the SAMR Model (Puentedura, 2006, 2013), the Gamification Acceptance Model (Ab. Rahman et al., 2018), and the 3Ps Model (Pham et al., 2020) to implement games effectively in speaking lessons.

Gamification Perceived Usefulness (GPU)

Gamification perceived usefulness (GPU) can be defined as the students' belief that using gamification will improve their learning performance (Ab. Rahman et al., 2018).

Table 3. Perceived usefulness of Speaking Snakes.

Statements	Mean	Standard Deviation (SD)
GPU1: Playing this game would improve my speaking fluency.	3.57	.53
GPU2: Using this product would increase my knowledge.	4.14	.38
GPU3: Playing this game would enhance my English proficiency during the playing process.	3.88	.38
GPU4: Playing this game would make it easier to understand English.	3.88	.38
GPU5: Playing this game is useful in improving my English-speaking fluency in a fun way.	4.29	.49

Table 3 indicated that the statements which was rated with the highest mean is GPU5 "Playing this game is useful in improving my English-speaking fluency in a fun way" (SD = .49). With this result, it shows that the objective of designing a speaking game such as Speaking Snakes has reached its objective as participants in unison has perceived that Speaking Snakes is a fun language game. GPU2 follows the second highest mean:

"Using this product would increase my knowledge." Based on the participants' experience from playing the game, they learned new knowledge from each other as they responded to the prompts. GPU3 "Playing this game would enhance my English proficiency during the playing process," and GPU4 "Playing this game would make it easier to understand the English language" have recorded the third highest mean with 3.88 (SD = .38) respectively. The participants believed that when they played this game, their English proficiency was enhanced incidentally, and, at the same time, they could improve their understanding of the English language by listening to their friends' responses based on the prompts. However, the participants rated GPU1 as "Playing this game would improve my speaking fluency," with the lowest mean being 3.57 (SD = 3.57). This implies that the participants think that using a language game such as Speaking Snakes is not the sole method to improve their speaking fluency, and there could be other effective strategies to achieve fluency.

Generally, there are a few important skills that students need to master in order to achieve speaking fluency. The speech rate, phonation time ratio, mean utterance length, and the frequency of using stressed words in one minute are important variables in determining whether someone's language is native or non-native (Kormos & Denes, 2004; as cited in Gajdos & Korpas, 2020). Other than these four variables, students must also have a good command of English in terms of vocabulary (Kaisa, n.d.), grammar (Binus University, n.d.), pronunciation (Kabelka, 2024), and listening (Reshmi, 2021). The students unconsciously applied all these variables and skills while playing Speaking Snakes, immersing them in the speaking lesson.

Gamification Perceived Ease of Use (GPEU)

According to Ab. Rahman et al (2018), gamification perceived ease of use (GPEU) is the students' expectation that the gamification that assists their language learning is effortless.

Table 4. Perceived ease of use of Speaking Snakes.

Statements	Mean	Standard Deviation (SD)
GPEU1: Learning the rules of this game would be easy for me.	4.43	.53
GPEU2: I would find it easy to play this game.	4.57	.53
GPEU3: My experience while playing this game would be clear and understandable.	4.57	.53
GPEU4: I would find this game to be flexible to play with.	4.57	.53
GPEU5: It would be easy for me to become skilled at playing the game.	4.29	.49

Table 4 shows the perceived ease of use experienced by the participants after playing Speaking Snakes for nearly two hours in the classroom. The statement with the highest mean is rated for three statements which are GPEU2 "I would find it easy to play this game", GPEU3 "My experience while playing this game would be clear and understandable" and GPEU4 "I would find this game to be flexible to be played with" with the mean of 4.57 (SD = .53) respectively. The participants who answered the feedback form agreed that Speaking Snakes is a game that is easy to play and flexible, while providing its users with a clear and understandable experience. The second highest mean was recorded for GPEU1: "Learning the rules of this game would be easy for me". There could be a discrepancy among participants in whether they perceived that the game rules would be easy to follow. GPEU5 "It would be easy for me to become skilful at playing the game" has the lowest mean with 4.29 (SD = .49). Some participants might believe there are specific speaking skills they need to learn to ace the game.

The high mean scores recorded for statements GPEU 2, 3, and 4 showed that Speaking Snakes is easy to play, flexible, and can provide players with a clear and understandable experience. Hence, language educators must design a language game with such characteristics. Game designers must focus on core mechanics, user experience, and player engagement. Firstly, the game must revolve around one or a few simple gameplay mechanics that players can easily grasp (Trainor-Fogleman, n.d.). Next, game designers should consider users' experience by prioritising simplicity in design, integrating seamless tutorials, and providing clear goals and

feedback (Ghazaryan, 2014; Goodmin, 2023; Yeshaswi, 2024). Furthermore, the game is flexible when designed for different play styles (Minarik, n.d.) and encourages exploration and experimentation (Allmer, 2009). In study of Wang (2010; as cited in Kaur & Abdul Aziz, 2020), he listed characteristics of communicative games. Through language games, students can get exposure to real-life conversation in English, as traditional teaching methods forbid language use. Wang (2010) cited Krashen's (1982) idea that indicate language learning occurs from using the language in speaking rather than just focusing the grammar. Through language games, learners are allowed to interact with others using English to get meaning or exchange information (Larsen, 2000; Littlewood, 1981; Widdowson, 1979; as cited in Kaur & Abdul Aziz, 2020).

The lowest mean score was recorded for GPEU5. It indicates that students perceived they might have difficulty achieving Speaking Snakes because this game depends on their fate while rolling the dice. Apart from that, the game with too many unclear rules will hinder the motivation among students to continue playing the game. A well-developed board game that matches specific learning objectives contains high educational value and is highly practical in a classroom. As most students are interested in games, they will be driven to follow the game rules and speak the target language of the games. They will acquire the language subconsciously as they generate a larger vocabulary through the games. In foreign countries, board games have been widely used as a technique in teaching speaking skills as board games incorporate elements of turn-taking and cooperative learning, which require every player to speak, enabling communication to occur naturally among pupils (Arslan et al., 2011; Syakur, 2020).

LIMITATION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study is not without its limitations. Firstly, the small sample size and low response rate pose a significant constraint, as only seven out of twenty-nine participants responded to the post-activity questionnaire, resulting in a response rate of merely 24.14%. Such a limited number of respondents weakens the statistical reliability and generalisability of the findings. Secondly, the absence of a pre-test and post-test design or a control group restricts the study's ability to determine the actual improvement in speaking fluency. The findings are therefore based solely on students' self-reported perceptions rather than objective performance measures. Thirdly, the study examined only two variables from the Gamification Acceptance Model (GAM) which are perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use while excluding other relevant constructs such as attitude and engagement. This narrow focus provides only a partial understanding of learners' acceptance of gamified speaking tools. Moreover, the research was conducted within a single institutional context involving non-English major students from a public university in Sarawak, Malaysia, limiting its external validity and applicability to other ESL contexts. Additionally, the intervention was short-term and conducted within one session, which captures only immediate perceptions without considering long-term effects on speaking performance or motivation. Finally, the study relied exclusively on self-reported data through Likert-scale responses, which may be influenced by social desirability bias. Future research should address these limitations by incorporating a larger and more diverse sample, implementing pre- and post-tests or longitudinal designs, expanding the scope of measured variables, and combining self-reported data with performance-based assessments to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of gamified approaches in speaking instruction.

To improve the reliability and generalisability of future research, a larger and more representative sample should be employed across multiple faculties or institutions to ensure broader applicability of the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Incorporating a pre-test and post-test design with a control group would allow researchers to measure actual improvement in speaking fluency, strengthening causal interpretation (Richards, 2008). Data triangulation through questionnaires, oral performance assessments, and teacher or peer evaluations would also enhance reliability by integrating both subjective and objective evidence (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2010). Longitudinal observation over several sessions is recommended to examine whether learning gains are sustained over time (Gajdos & Korpas, 2020). In addition, expanding the variables beyond perceived usefulness and ease of use to include attitude, motivation, and engagement would provide a more comprehensive understanding of learners' acceptance of gamified tools (Ab. Rahman et al., 2018). Finally, instrument reliability should be verified through pilot testing and internal consistency analysis (Pallant, 2020).

Pedagogical Implications

The implementation of Speaking Snakes offers several pedagogical implications for ESL teaching and learning. First, it demonstrates the value of gamification as a communicative tool that transforms conventional speaking lessons into learner-centred, low-anxiety environments. By integrating play, movement, and competition, educators can stimulate spontaneous language use and create authentic communicative opportunities that strengthen fluency and confidence (Azhar & Gopal, 2021; Kaur & Abdul Aziz, 2020).

Second, Speaking Snakes highlights the importance of affective engagement in language learning. The fun, interactive nature of the board game reduces fear of making mistakes and encourages risk-taking in speech This matter should be considered by language educators as critical affective factors are often neglected in test-oriented classrooms (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). Educators can therefore use gamified activities to build positive learner attitudes, particularly among low-proficiency students who struggle with anxiety or lack of motivation.

Third, the study underscores the need for collaborative learning. Since Speaking Snakes involves peer interaction, turn-taking, and shared problem-solving, it supports the development of social communication skills alongside linguistic competence (Mangaleswaran & Abdul Aziz, 2019). Teachers can use such games to promote peer feedback and cooperative dialogue, aligning with communicative language teaching (CLT) principles.

Fourth, educators should adopt reflective debriefing sessions after gameplay. Having students discuss what strategies helped them communicate effectively reinforces metacognitive awareness of language use. It is an essential component of autonomous learning to guide students in reflecting their metacognitive awareness in order to identify language learning strategies which will help them in different situation in the future (Richards, 2008).

Finally, the study implies that institutions should incorporate gamified learning into curriculum design and teacher training. Educators should be encouraged to design, adapt, or evaluate board games like Speaking Snakes using frameworks such as the SAMR Model (Puentedura, 2006, 2013) and Gamification Acceptance Model (Ab. Rahman et al., 2018) to ensure that technology or game-based tools are meaningfully integrated rather than superficially used.

CONCLUSION

The main objective of this study was to determine the gamification perceived usefulness (GPU) and gamification perceived ease of use (GPEU) in integrating Speaking Snakes in a speaking lesson. The main findings suggest that Speaking Snakes is a fun language game, and students believed its use could improve their speaking fluency. In addition, students also found that Speaking Snakes is easy to play, flexible, and able to provide players a clear and understandable experience. The combination of these characteristics could influence the behavioural intentions among students to continue using Speaking Snakes in future speaking lessons.

As a result of this study, there is a theoretical implication for students' acceptance of Speaking Snakes in this classroom action research. The framework used to guide the placement of Speaking Snakes in a speaking lesson, which is the SAMR Model, can create new teaching and learning experiences that would not be possible without this product. However, other models can be tested to implement Speaking Snakes in speaking lessons, such as the Gamification Acceptance Model and the 3Ps Model, that might yield different user experiences depending on how the game is placed in the lesson.

The findings of this study also offer essential practical implications for educational institutions and language educators. First, language educators must be positive and aware of the need to implement suitable games in language classrooms. Subsequently, they need to know how to use and demonstrate the game before students can play it. Moreover, language educators should reflect on the perceived usefulness and ease of use of gamification when selecting any game that matches the language skills they intend to teach. Lastly, language

educators must also be exposed to a suitable platform to network and connect with other language educators practising gamification for professional purposes.

The main limitation of this study is the small sample size. A stronger result can be produced if the response rate exceeds 50%. Besides, the study focuses on gamification perceived usefulness (GPU) and gamification perceived ease of use (GPEU) in one of the public universities in Sarawak. Hence, the findings cannot be generalised to other public universities across Malaysia.

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