

THE ROLES OF THE FANBASE ONLINE GAME TO THE EFL READING COMPREHENSION SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of online games and fanbase communities has created new opportunities for language learning outside traditional classroom settings. Games designed for specific fan communities, such as those centred around K-pop groups, incorporate substantial English language content that may influence English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' reading skills. This study aims to investigate the role of the fanbase online game "BTS Island in the Seom" in developing EFL students' reading comprehension skills among Indonesian university students. A qualitative case study approach was employed with purposive sampling of five Indonesian university students who had reached level 3000 in the game. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and document analysis, including academic transcripts and gameplay recordings. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and relationships in the data. Four significant roles of the fanbase online game were identified: (1) functioning as an English learning medium that contextualizes language acquisition, (2) facilitating vocabulary enrichment and mastery through repeated exposure, (3) enhancing motivation to engage with English content due to fan interest, and (4) directly improving reading comprehension skills as evidenced by academic performance improvements. Fanbase online games can serve as effective informal learning environments for developing EFL reading comprehension when they successfully integrate engaging content with authentic language use. The strong motivational component derived from fan identity appears particularly significant in sustaining engagement with potentially challenging language content.

Keywords: BTS Island, EFL Learning, Fanbase Learning, Online Game, Reading Comprehension

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary digital landscape, online games have become integral to daily entertainment for many people worldwide. The rapid advancement of technology has led to the proliferation of high-quality online games that are increasingly accessible across platforms and demographics. While excessive gaming has been associated with potential negative impacts such as eye strain and decreased mental health (Pinem, 2012), there is growing recognition of the educational potential of these digital environments, particularly for language acquisition. Many online games incorporate English as their primary language for instructions, narratives, and player communication, creating opportunities for incidental language learning through immersive exposure.

With the rise of digital gaming, the global spread of Korean popular culture (K-pop) represents another significant technological and cultural phenomenon. The accessibility of digital platforms has facilitated the rapid international dissemination of K-pop content, connecting fans across geographical and linguistic boundaries. Among the most globally influential K-pop groups is BTS (Bangtan Sonyeondan or “Bulletproof Boy Scouts”), whose fanbase—known as ARMY (Adorable Representative MC for Youth)—constitutes one of the largest and most dedicated fan communities worldwide.

The convergence of these two phenomena—online gaming and K-pop fandom—materialized in June 2022 with “BTS Island in the Seom,” a mobile game featuring BTS members as characters. The game’s narrative structure includes extensive character dialogues, storylines, and instructions predominantly in English. What makes this particularly noteworthy is the rapid progression of players through the game’s initial 1,000 levels, compelling developers to implement weekly 50-level updates to keep pace with player demand. This phenomenon raises important questions about how fan communities engage with the English language content embedded within the game, especially considering that many ARMY members, including those in Indonesia, are non-native English speakers.

The educational significance of this intersection becomes even more apparent when considering the broader context of reading comprehension skills among Indonesian students. Reading constitutes what Anderson et al. (1985) describe as “a basic life skill,” but compelling reading requires comprehension beyond mere text decoding. As Ke (2022) emphasizes, understanding the meaning contained within the text is essential for functional literacy. Indonesian students often face challenges with reading comprehension in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), making any potential facilitator of improvement worthy of investigation.

Previous research has established preliminary connections between gaming and language learning outcomes. Amin and Wahyudin (2022) demonstrated the significant impact of the game “Age of Empires II” on students’ comprehension of narrative texts. More recently, Syal and Nietfeld (2024) found that game-based learning environments improved reading comprehension and intrinsic motivation more than traditional approaches. Sylvén and Sundqvist (2012) documented correlations between extramural English activities, including gaming, and L2 proficiency among young learners. Chen and Yang (2013) observed that adventure games featuring problem-solving elements could enhance reading comprehension by providing contextual language learning opportunities.

However, limited research exists on the specific dynamics of fanbase-driven gaming and its impact on EFL reading comprehension. The unique motivational factors in fan communities, particularly the intense engagement characteristic of K-pop fandoms, may create distinctive conditions for language acquisition that merit dedicated study. This research seeks to address this gap by investigating the specific roles that fanbase online games play in developing EFL reading comprehension skills.

This study explicitly examines BTS Island in the Seom as a case study to explore how engagement with a fanbase online game influences Indonesian university students’ English reading comprehension skills. By investigating this phenomenon, we aim to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how affinity spaces centred around popular culture can potentially function as informal language learning environments.

METHODS

Study Design

This research employed a qualitative case study approach to explore the relationship between fanbase online gaming and EFL reading comprehension skills. According to Creswell (2012), qualitative methods are particularly appropriate for investigating phenomena that require in-depth exploration and interaction with individuals through flexible data collection methods. The case study format allowed for a detailed examination of participants' experiences with BTS Island in the Seom and its perceived impact on their English language learning, particularly reading comprehension. This approach enabled capturing rich, contextual data about participants' engagement with the game and their language learning trajectories.

Research Setting and Participant

The study was conducted online using the WhatsApp application's video call feature during January-February 2023. This virtual setting was selected to accommodate the geographical distribution of participants while maintaining the quality of face-to-face interaction necessary for in-depth interviews.

Five participants were selected through purposive sampling, which Patton (2015) describes as selecting "information-rich cases for in-depth study." The specific inclusion criteria were:

1. Active players of BTS Island in the Seom who had achieved level 3000 or higher (demonstrating substantial engagement with the game)
2. Indonesian university students currently enrolled in programs where English is taught as a foreign language
3. Willingness to share academic transcripts showing English language or reading course performance both before and after exposure to the game (dating from before and after June 28, 2022, when the game was released)

The small sample size (n=5) was deliberate, allowing for an in-depth investigation of individual experiences and learning trajectories. As Creswell and Poth (2018) note, qualitative case studies typically involve a limited number of cases to facilitate detailed analysis. While this approach limits generalizability, it enables a rich exploration of the phenomenon. The participants represented diverse academic backgrounds (different majors and universities) but shared the common characteristic of being dedicated players of the game and members of the BTS ARMY fanbase.

The sample size limitation is acknowledged as a constraint on the generalizability of findings. However, as Stake (1995) argues, case studies aim for "particularization, not generalization," seeking to understand the uniqueness of specific cases rather than producing broadly applicable conclusions.

Instrument of study

Interview

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection instrument. The interview protocol consisted of 15 open-ended questions to elicit detailed accounts of participants' experiences with the game and perceptions of its impact on their English reading skills. Questions explored gameplay habits, strategies for dealing with unfamiliar English content, and perceived changes in reading abilities. As Hunter (2015) explains, interviewing is "a main data collection technique that involves various styles, from informal to formal conversations," enabling researchers to access participants' perspectives and interpretations of their learning processes.

Document

Document analysis provided complementary data sources that triangulated interview findings. Following Becks et al. (2000), document data were collected to "understand the context, support interpretation, and provide additional information" about participants' learning trajectories. Three types of documents were collected:

1. Personal documents: Participants' notes, learning journals, and self-assessments related to their gameplay and English learning
2. Official documents: Academic transcripts showing English course performance before and after exposure to the game (dating from before and after June 28, 2022)
3. Audiovisual documents: Recordings of gameplay sessions demonstrating how participants engaged with in-game text and navigated language challenges

These documents provided objective evidence to corroborate self-reported learning outcomes and captured aspects of the learning process that might not emerge during interviews.

Technique of Collecting Data

The data collection process followed these sequential steps:

1. Initial screening of potential participants through social media groups dedicated to BTS ARMY in Indonesia to identify those who met the selection criteria
2. Development of detailed interview protocols and document collection guidelines based on research questions and literature review
3. Conducting individual interviews via video call, with recording for later transcription
4. Collection of supporting documents, including academic transcripts, gameplay records, and personal notes
5. Follow-up interviews where necessary to clarify points or explore emerging themes
6. Organization of collected data into a secure database for analysis

Each step incorporated measures to ensure data quality and ethical compliance. Participants were informed about the research purpose and data usage, and their consent was obtained to record interviews and analyze documents. Confidentiality was maintained through pseudonymization of all data.

Technique of Data Analysis

This study employed thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” that offers flexibility while maintaining methodological rigour. The analysis followed six systematic stages:

1. Familiarizing with the data: At this stage, researchers must understand the data collected through various techniques. Reading and understanding data on an iterative basis is necessary to find meanings, patterns, and other elements needed to start the coding process.
2. Generating code: This process involves systematic coding across the data set, identifying interesting data segments, and assigning codes. Coding helps to organize the data and prepares for identifying themes.
3. Looking themes. Themes themselves are essential patterns in the data that connect the resulting codes. This step involves grouping similar codes to form a theme, developing a theme from a group of codes with a broader meaning, and then describing the relationship between the code and the topic.
4. Reviewing themes: Two steps are carried out during the review process. The first is a review at the code level, and this is done to find out whether the code formed in the code is a consistent pattern. Then secondly, a review of the data collection helps find the identified themes that represent all the material and can answer the research questions.
5. Defining themes: In defining themes, several things are involved, including the need to write in detail for each topic, identify the nature of each subject and the knowledge it represents, and give the topic a clear and descriptive name.
6. Producing report: In making the report, the main themes are explained and supported with data references, and the thematic findings are linked to existing literature and research questions. The report provides an in-depth analysis and interpretation of the topics found.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

BTS Island as an English Learning Media for Media

The first central theme identified in the data analysis revealed that participants perceived BTS Island in the Seom as an effective English learning medium. Four respondents acknowledged the game’s potential for developing reading comprehension skills, citing specific aspects of gameplay that facilitated language learning.

The narrative-driven nature of the game emerged as a key factor in creating a meaningful context for language acquisition. Respondent 1 articulated: “*Of course, it is possible because it is not just a puzzle; there is a story, and from this story, we follow and understand the plot and what the characters say.*” This comment highlights how the game’s storytelling elements created a situation where understanding English text became intrinsically essential to gameplay progression and enjoyment, aligning with Gee’s (2007) concept of “situated meaning”, where language is learned within contextually rich environments.

The reduced affective barriers to learning within the gaming environment were emphasized by Respondent 2: “*I think it can because the game can help me improve my English*

skills, and I do not feel burdened while playing it, so it is beneficial." This observation reflects Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis, suggesting that the low-anxiety context of gameplay may facilitate more effective language acquisition compared to formal instructional settings where performance anxiety can impede learning.

The process of incremental vocabulary acquisition through repeated exposure was noted by Respondent 3: *"In my opinion, it is possible because from the beginning of using it to the end of using it several times, at the beginning, the English was still a bit lacking, but after some time because of it often, for example, there is a word that I do not know, open Google Translate so I can increase my vocabulary."* This description aligns with Webb's (2007) findings on the value of repeated encounters with vocabulary in varied contexts for developing deep lexical knowledge.

The appeal of game-based learning for younger generations was highlighted by Respondent 4: *"Maybe it can. The current generation is more exciting and not monotonous, so games help us learn different things. If we do not understand, we should look for the meaning."* This perspective echoes Prensky's (2001) concept of "digital natives" who may respond more positively to interactive, technology-mediated learning experiences than traditional text-based instruction.

Document analysis of participants' academic transcripts provided objective support for these perceptions, showing that three participants demonstrated improved performance in English courses after engaging with the game, while two maintained stable scores. Audiovisual records confirmed that all five participants consistently engaged with in-game dialogue rather than skipping it, suggesting genuine interaction with the English content rather than mere superficial gameplay.

These findings align with previous research on digital game-based language learning. Toufik and Hanane (2021) found that Online Video Games (OVGs) enhanced intercultural communication skills among EFL learners by providing authentic contexts for language use. Similarly, Kobis and Tomatala (2020) demonstrated that the game Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB) facilitated various English language skills, with 67.7% of participants reporting improvement in speaking and pronunciation and 58.1% noting enhancement in reading abilities.

The evidence from this study extends these findings by highlighting how the fan-based nature of BTS Island creates additional layers of engagement with the language content. Unlike generic educational games, the connection to beloved cultural figures enhances the willingness to persist through language challenges that might otherwise cause frustration or disengagement.

Enrich and Mastery in Vocabulary

A second prominent theme emerging from the data was the role of the game in facilitating vocabulary acquisition and mastery. Participants consistently reported that encountering unfamiliar words in the game prompted them to seek out meanings, effectively driving self-directed vocabulary learning.

Respondent 2 described a problem-solving approach to vocabulary gaps: *"There must be instructions, and some people do not understand them when opening a dictionary or laptop to understand them."* This fact reflects how the gameplay created authentic communicative needs

that motivated strategic learning behaviours, similar to the task-based language learning approaches advocated by Ellis (2003), where meaningful tasks drive language acquisition.

Respondent 3 explicitly linked gameplay to vocabulary development over time: *“From the start of playing the game to the end of playing it a few times in the beginning, like when it comes to English, it is still lacking, right? However, over time, because you play it often, for example, there is a word I do not know. Open Google Translate so you can increase your vocabulary.”* This account demonstrates how repeated exposure to vocabulary in meaningful contexts led to incremental acquisition, supporting Nation’s (2001) assertion that vocabulary learning is enhanced when words are encountered multiple times in varied contexts.

Document analysis revealed different vocabulary learning strategies among participants. One participant demonstrated high comprehension with minimal need for vocabulary support—another employed inferential strategy, using context to guess meanings during gameplay and confirming them afterwards. The remaining three participants, who initially struggled more with the in-game text, developed systematic approaches, including keeping vocabulary notebooks to record new words and phrases—a strategy that Schmitt and Schmitt (1995) identify as effective for vocabulary retention.

The study findings suggest that the vocabulary acquisition facilitated by BTS Island is particularly valuable because it exposed learners to words and phrases beyond those typically encountered in formal English instruction. The specialized vocabulary related to the game’s themes and narratives expanded participants’ lexical knowledge in ways that traditional textbooks might not, while the meaningful context of gameplay supported retention and appropriate usage understanding.

This finding aligns with research on digital game-based vocabulary learning. Lubis and Zulfitri (2022) found that users of the “Mr. Detective” game application showed significantly enhanced vocabulary mastery compared to control groups, with experimental group participants scoring an average of 80.00 versus 70.56 in the control group. Similarly, Hafifah et al. (2022) documented how children playing various online games acquired specific English vocabulary terms relevant to gameplay.

A limitation of this study is the lack of formal pre-and post-testing of vocabulary knowledge to quantify gains precisely. Future research should incorporate standardized vocabulary assessments to measure the breadth and depth of vocabulary acquisition resulting from gameplay more accurately.

Motivating the EFL to Learn English

The third central theme centred on motivation, with participants consistently reporting that their desire to understand the game’s narrative and character interactions drove them to engage more deeply with English language content.

Respondent 5 articulated this motivational aspect clearly: *“The role is more about motivation to understand the conversation; it will automatically improve reading skills.”* This statement highlights how intrinsic interest in the game content translated into motivation for language learning, creating what Gardner and Lambert (1972) would describe as integrative motivation—a desire to learn a language to participate in a valued community or activity.

Document analysis of this respondent’s academic transcripts corroborated this self-assessment, showing improved performance in English courses after engaging with the game.

This study suggests that the motivational effects extended beyond the gaming context to influence formal academic achievement, supporting Dörnyei's (2005) concept of the "L2 Motivational Self System", where language learning is driven by a vision of oneself as a competent language user in personally meaningful contexts.

The motivational impact of BTS Island appears to derive from multiple sources. First, the BTS fandom connection created strong affective engagement, as fans were motivated to understand content related to their favourite musical artists. Second, the game's ranking system and competitive elements introduced achievement motivation. Third, the social dimension of group events within the game (allowing up to 30 players to collaborate) created community-based motivation.

These findings align with Gamlo's (2019) research on mobile game-based language learning applications, demonstrating increased motivation among EFL students. Similarly, Marsa et al. (2021) found that the game-based learning platform Kahoot! Positively influenced reading comprehension achievement through enhanced motivation.

What distinguishes BTS Island from other educational games is the fanbase dimension. Participants described being motivated to complete levels quickly and understand all storyline elements as "a form of support and love from fans for their idols." This integration of fan identity with language learning created a powerful motivational synergy that sustained engagement over time, reflecting Jenkins' (2006) concept of "participatory culture", where fans actively engage with and create meaning around the media they care about.

The time-limited nature of in-game events created additional motivational pressure, as players needed to complete specific missions within deadlines to unlock special features and character appearances. This combination of intrinsic interest in BTS-related content and external gameplay pressures created a rich motivational environment that sustained language learning efforts even when challenging.

A limitation of this study is its focus on already-motivated fans, raising questions about the generalizability of these motivational effects to non-fans or casual players. Future research should explore how different degrees of fan identification affect motivation and language learning outcomes in game-based contexts.

Helping EFL Learners in improving Reading Comprehension skills

The most significant theme concerned the direct impact of gameplay on reading comprehension abilities. All five participants reported subjective improvement in their comprehension skills after extended engagement with the game.

Respondent 2 said, "*I think it has increased because this game hones reading skills.*" Respondent 3 noted perceived improvement: "*It is already pretty good. Before, it was less, but after that, it is not bad because the vocabulary has also increased.*" Respondent 4 linked gameplay to academic performance: "*Before using this game, the score was a little unsatisfactory, but after playing BTS Island, it helped, so the score increased gradually.*" Respondent 5 concisely affirmed: "*improving and getting better.*"

Document analysis provided objective support for these self-assessments. Academic transcripts showed that four participants achieved higher scores in English and reading comprehension courses after playing BTS Island, while one maintained stable performance.

This triangulation between self-reported improvement and academic performance strengthens the evidence for positive impact.

Interview data further revealed qualitative changes in reading comprehension processes, with participants reporting increased ease in understanding conversations and extracting meaning from the game's storylines after extended gameplay. This finding suggests development in vocabulary knowledge and higher-order comprehension skills such as inferencing and contextual understanding.

These findings align with experimental research by Komala and Rifai (2021), who found substantially higher reading comprehension scores among students using video game formats (average 75.5) compared to traditional paper formats (average 37). Similarly, Meutia et al. (2020) documented improved performance after game-based instruction, with average scores increasing from 63.6 to 74.6.

The improvement in reading comprehension skills appears to result from integrating multiple factors: enhanced vocabulary knowledge, increased motivation, contextual learning, and authentic communication needs. The game created a learning environment where comprehension was both necessary for successful gameplay and intrinsically rewarding due to the narrative content involving characters of high interest to the participants.

However, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the small sample size limits the generalizability of findings. Second, other factors beyond game exposure could influence academic performance improvements. Third, the lack of a control group makes it difficult to isolate the specific impact of the game versus other learning experiences. Future research should address these limitations through larger samples, control groups, and more rigorous pre-and post-testing of reading comprehension abilities.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the roles that fanbase online gaming plays in developing EFL reading comprehension skills, using BTS Island in the Seom as a case study. Through qualitative analysis of interview data and supporting documents, four significant roles were identified: serving as an English learning medium, enriching vocabulary knowledge, motivating EFL learners, and improving reading comprehension skills.

The most notable contribution of this research is highlighting how fanbase elements create unique motivational conditions for language learning. The connection to BTS as a cultural icon generated extraordinary levels of engagement with English-language content that might otherwise have been perceived as challenging or unappealing. This study suggests that leveraging learners' interests and affiliations may significantly enhance language learning outcomes, particularly for recreational reading beyond required academic texts.

Integrating language learning within authentic gameplay contexts is crucial to the positive outcomes observed. Rather than treating language as an object of study, BTS Island embedded English within meaningful activities where comprehension directly enhanced gameplay enjoyment and success. This contextual learning approach aligns with communicative language teaching principles while removing the artificial nature of many classroom exercises.

These findings have implications for both formal and informal language education. For educators, they suggest the potential value of incorporating fan interests and game-based

elements into language instruction. Game developers they highlight opportunities to intentionally design games that support language acquisition while maintaining engaging gameplay. The study also contributes to the theoretical understanding of how affinity spaces centred around popular culture can function as informal language learning environments.

Several limitations of this study must be acknowledged. The small sample size ($n=5$) limits the generalizability of findings to the broader population of EFL learners or even BTS ARMY members. The reliance on self-reported perceptions of improvement, even when triangulated with academic records, provides limited objective measurement of actual language gains. Additionally, the participants were already highly motivated fans, raising questions about whether similar benefits would accrue to non-fans or casual players.

Future research should address these limitations through larger sample sizes, more diverse participant groups, and more rigorous pre-and post-testing of language abilities. Longitudinal studies could investigate the sustainability of language learning gains achieved through fanbase gaming and their transfer to other language contexts. Comparative studies examining different types of games and fan communities could help identify which elements are most conducive to language learning.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that fanbase online games like BTS Island in the Seom can serve as powerful informal learning environments for EFL reading comprehension development when they successfully integrate engaging content, authentic language use, and strong motivational elements derived from fan identity and interest. While not a replacement for formal language instruction, such games represent a valuable complementary resource for language development that educators and learners should recognize and potentially leverage.

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