



Exploring the Impact of Interactive Games on the Acquisition of Maltese Prepositions

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Abstract

Game-based learning is becoming more generally acknowledged as a successful instructional approach in higher education. The present study investigates the impact and effectiveness of game-based learning on adult international students, focusing on the interactive game *The Mdina Castle's Treasure Quest*, to teach Maltese prepositions. While Żammit (2024) explored the theoretical potential of game-based learning, this study contributes empirical evidence demonstrating its effectiveness in practice. The following discussion contextualises these results within existing pedagogical literature.

The study comprised an experimental group that acquired knowledge of Maltese prepositions using a game-based platform set on *The Mdina Castle's Treasure Quest* and a control group that received conventional lecture-based training from the same teacher. The experimental group, consisting of 64 adult learners from international backgrounds, engaged in a game to find concealed medieval artefacts within the vast corridors, subterranean rooms, and fortified towers of Mdina Castle. Conversely, the control group, consisting of 62 adult learners, received instruction utilising conventional classroom techniques.

The results indicated that the group participating in game-based learning achieved significantly higher scores than the control group in post-instruction evaluations on Maltese prepositions, highlighting the efficacy of this approach in structured language learning. Furthermore, the participants who engaged in game-based learning exhibited elevated levels of engagement, motivation, and favourable attitudes toward the process of learning.

However, while these findings demonstrate the immediate effectiveness of game-based learning, future research should explore its long-term retention impact to determine the sustainability of learning outcomes. Providing vital insights into the efficacy of game-based approaches in higher education, this study emphasises the benefits of interactive gaming in language acquisition for adult learners and underscores the importance of immersive educational experiences.

Keywords: Preposition Acquisition, Interactive Learning, Adult Learners, Maltese Language, Game-Based Teaching.

1. Introduction

In recent years, game-based learning has emerged as a compelling educational strategy within higher education. This approach emphasises the use of engaging, game-like activities to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge and skills (Karagiorgas and Niemann, 2017). Its growing popularity stems from its ability to foster active learning, enhance engagement, and promote a deeper understanding of subject matter (Ismaizam et al., 2022). Language acquisition, particularly for adult learners, is one area where this methodology has shown notable promise.

Żammit (2024) highlighted the theoretical and pedagogical potential of using interactive games to enhance language acquisition, with a specific focus on Maltese prepositions. While her work emphasised the need for immersive educational experiences, this study extends her findings by exploring the empirical impact of a specific game, *The Mdina Castle's Treasure Quest*, on an international cohort of adult learners. Through this game, prepositions are embedded into an interactive narrative where participants navigate a virtual castle, solve puzzles, and face challenges in pursuit of a medieval gold coin treasure.

By immersing 64 international adult learners in this environment, the study examines the effectiveness of the game compared to traditional lecture-based teaching methods. Furthermore, it explores learners' attitudes and motivations toward game-based learning. Unlike Żammit (2024), which primarily focused on the conceptual benefits of game-based learning, this research emphasises measurable outcomes in terms of engagement, motivation, and linguistic proficiency.

However, this study acknowledges its limitations, including the relatively small sample size and short intervention period. Future research should explore larger and more diverse cohorts to ensure broader applicability and examine the long-term retention of language learning outcomes.

The primary aims of this study are twofold: to evaluate the effect of game-based learning on prepositional understanding and to assess students' engagement and perceptions of this approach. By comparing the outcomes of game-based instruction with conventional methods, the research contributes to the discourse on innovative teaching strategies within higher education, providing practical insights for educators seeking to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes.

1.1 Game-Based Learning in Higher Education

Game-based learning has garnered attention as an effective teaching method, particularly in higher education. This approach encourages active engagement, motivation, and experiential learning through immersive and interactive game-like environments (Karagiorgas and Niemann, 2017). According to Jääskä et al. (2022), game-based methods facilitate exploration and problem-solving, which enhance knowledge retention, critical thinking, and academic performance across diverse disciplines (Karakoç et al., 2022).

Knowles' Andragogy Theory

According to Knowles' (1980) andragogical model, adult learners are self-directed and benefit from experiential, problem-solving learning environments. Game-based learning aligns with this approach by promoting autonomy and engagement.

Integrated constructivist learning principles

Game-based learning is also supported by constructivist theory (Piaget, 1950; Vygotsky, 1978), which emphasizes learning through active participation and real-world application. The interactive challenges in The Mdina Castle's Treasure Quest encourage learners to construct meaning through exploration and feedback.

1.1.1 Language Learning Through Game-Based Methods

Traditional methods often fall short of meeting adult learners' needs for practical application and engagement (Akintolu and Letseka, 2021). In contrast, game-based instruction combines entertainment and education to support language acquisition (Bygstad et al., 2022). This method creates a supportive learning environment where students practice language skills and grammar rules, fostering communicative competence (Yaccob and Yunus, 2019). Studies, including Żammit (2024), have highlighted the value of interactive gaming for improving proficiency and motivation. However, this study builds upon that work by employing specific methodologies to measure prepositional learning outcomes through direct testing and qualitative feedback. However, this study advances prior research by implementing empirical methodologies to measure both learning outcomes and learner engagement through direct testing and qualitative feedback.

1.1.2 Teaching Prepositions Through Game-Based Learning

Prepositions play a crucial role in mastering language accuracy and communication. However, traditional methods, which often rely on rote memorisation, can hinder contextual understanding (Kilimci, 2017). Game-based learning, such as the approach examined in this study, enhances students' comprehension and application of prepositions through meaningful and interactive contexts (Lin et al., 2018). While Żammit (2024) discusses the theoretical effectiveness of integrating prepositions into gameplay, this study contributes empirical findings that quantify learning gains, providing a stronger basis for advocating game-based methods.

1.1.3 Engagement and Motivation in Game-Based Learning

Student motivation and engagement are critical for effective learning. Game-based approaches are particularly effective due to their interactive and enjoyable nature (Jääskä et al., 2022). Immediate feedback, autonomy, and challenge-based tasks in such games foster intrinsic motivation and contribute to a positive learning experience (Bygstad et al., 2022). Research also highlights that these elements lead to improved academic outcomes, persistence, and favourable attitudes toward learning (Adipat et al., 2021; Anastasiadis et al., 2018). This study, informed by Żammit (2024), focuses on the unique needs of international adult learners and offers an empirical comparison of game-based and traditional methods to address a gap in Maltese language education. The current study extends existing research by incorporating international adult learners, highlighting the broader applicability of game-based learning beyond conventional classroom settings.

2. Materials and Methods

This study adopted a quasi-experimental design to investigate the effectiveness of game-based learning in teaching Maltese prepositions to adult international learners. Building upon the theoretical insights provided by Żammit (2024), which emphasized the potential of interactive games for language acquisition, this research goes further by conducting an empirical comparison of game-based learning and traditional lecture-based methods, specifically using *The Mdina Castle's Treasure Quest*.

The primary objectives were to evaluate the impact of game-based learning on students' understanding and application of Maltese prepositions and to explore their engagement, motivation, and perceptions of this innovative teaching approach. Unlike Żammit (2024), which primarily focused on the theoretical foundations of game-based pedagogy, this study provides concrete evidence of learning improvements through a structured experimental framework.

2.1 Participants and Setting

The study involved 126 adult learners aged 18 to 65, representing diverse international backgrounds. The participants were enrolled in an A2-level Maltese language course designed to teach prepositions. Using purposive sampling (Saunders et al., 2012), the participants were divided into two groups:

Experimental Group: 64 learners who used the game-based learning platform *The Mdina Castle's Treasure Quest*.

Control Group: 62 learners who received traditional lecture-based instruction.

Both groups were taught by the same instructor over four months to ensure consistency and to examine potential long-term effects. The experimental group engaged with *The Mdina Castle's Treasure Quest*, an interactive game that integrates prepositions into its narrative. The participants explored a virtual medieval castle, solved puzzles, and overcame challenges requiring the contextual application of prepositions. This immersive environment provided learners with meaningful opportunities to practice language concepts.

In contrast, the control group received conventional instruction through lectures, discussions, and structured exercises focused on rote memorization and decontextualized practice of prepositions. This methodological divergence provided a direct comparison of the two approaches, setting the stage for a quantitative and qualitative analysis of learning outcomes, engagement, and retention rates, which are detailed in the following section. A follow-up assessment will be conducted six months after the intervention to evaluate long-term retention of Maltese prepositions. While the study successfully demonstrates the advantages of game-based learning, future research should investigate its long-term effectiveness in maintaining language proficiency over extended periods.

2.1.2 Data Collection

A mixed-methods approach was employed to gather both quantitative and qualitative data:

Post-Instruction Assessments: These measured the learners' understanding and application of Maltese prepositions. Test results were used to evaluate the effectiveness of each instructional method. To explore long-term retention impacts, a follow-up

assessment is recommended in future studies to determine whether the game-based learning approach leads to sustained knowledge retention over time.

Focus Group Discussions: Conducted with the experimental group, these discussions provided insights into the participants' perceptions, motivations, and experiences with the game-based approach. To enhance applicability, participants' responses were analyzed to identify factors that may influence the broader implementation of this method in different educational settings.

2.1.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis: Data were analysed using Welch's t-test (Hayes, 2021) to compare the mean scores and performance variability between the two groups. This statistical test was selected to account for unequal group sizes, addressing one of the study's limitations. Future research should consider increasing the sample size to improve the generalizability of the findings.

Qualitative Analysis: Data from focus group discussions were analysed using thematic analysis (Prabhaker et al., 2019). Recurring themes were identified, providing a deeper understanding of the participants' engagement and overall reception of the game-based learning approach.

Żammit (2024) emphasized the conceptual benefits of using gamified methods in language teaching, specifically advocating for the integration of interactive learning environments. However, her study did not include empirical data on how these methods impacted international learners or comparative analysis with traditional teaching methods. This research addresses that gap by incorporating measurable learning outcomes, statistical analyses, and detailed qualitative feedback. Additionally, this study provides practical implications for educators by outlining how gamified learning can be effectively applied in multilingual and international classroom settings.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Quantitative Findings

The quantitative analysis highlights significant differences between the performance of the experimental and control groups, showcasing the effectiveness of game-based learning in teaching Maltese prepositions. The experimental group achieved an average score of 73.44, outperforming the control group's mean of 59.68. Welch's t-test confirmed the statistical significance of this difference ($p\text{-value} = 0.0078$), indicating a minimal likelihood of these results being due to random chance. Unlike Żammit (2024), which primarily discussed theoretical outcomes without detailed statistical analysis, this study provides empirical evidence using actual test scores to substantiate the advantages of game-based methods.

3.1.1 Long-Term Retention Considerations

While the immediate effectiveness of game-based learning is evident from these results, further research should examine long-term retention by conducting follow-up assessments several months after instruction. This would provide insight into whether the observed learning gains persist over time. Future studies should assess knowledge retention at six months and one-year post-intervention to determine the sustainability of game-based learning

effects. Additionally, further research could explore how these findings translate across different learning environments and demographics.

3.1.2 Score Distribution Analysis

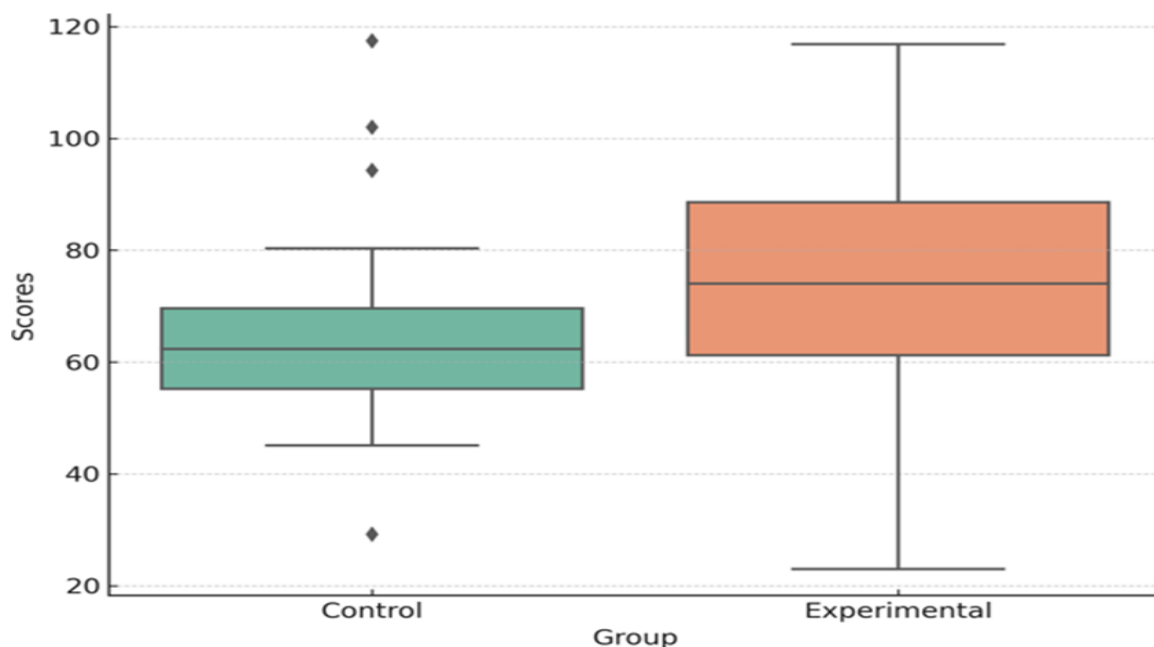
A closer examination of score distributions revealed that the experimental group exhibited a broader range of outcomes, with several participants achieving full marks (100). In contrast, the control group's scores were clustered in the mid-to-high range, with fewer individuals reaching the top scores. This suggests that the game-based learning approach facilitated deeper comprehension and allowed certain learners to excel, possibly due to its contextual and interactive nature. Furthermore, the standard deviation for the experimental group (20.53) was slightly higher than that of the control group (19.15), indicating greater variability in performance. This reflects individual differences in engagement and adaptability to the game-based platform.

Table 1: Group Performance Metrics

Metric	Control Group	Experimental Group
Mean Score	59.68	73.44
Standard Deviation	19.15	20.53
Number of Participants	62	64

The box plot in Figure 1 below illustrates the differences in score distribution between the experimental and control groups, with the experimental group outperforming.

Figure 1: Score Distribution Comparison



3.2 Qualitative Findings

Qualitative data collected from focus group discussions with the experimental group highlighted the advantages of game-based learning, particularly its impact on engagement, motivation, and comprehension. The participants consistently described The Mdina Castle's Treasure Quest as a transformative experience, reinforcing the statistical findings. Unlike Żammit (2024), who theorized the motivational benefits of game-based learning, this study presents firsthand accounts from the participants, offering direct insights into how the interactive approach influenced their learning. These qualitative perspectives add depth to the statistical findings, showcasing the human element of educational innovation.

3.2.1 Engagement and Enjoyment

The immersive environment of the game left a lasting impression on learners. A participant remarked, "The game turned prepositional learning into an exciting treasure hunt instead of a boring task." Another shared, "I actually looked forward to every session because it felt more like playing a game than studying." These insights highlight the practical implications of integrating gamified learning into classrooms to foster intrinsic motivation.

3.2.2 Immediate Feedback

Real-time corrections within the game emerged as a key benefit, helping learners understand and retain prepositions. "Whenever I made a mistake, the game corrected me straight away," one participant explained. "This immediate feedback helped me fix my errors before they became habits." Another noted, "Seeing the corrections as I played made it so much easier to remember the right way to use prepositions." These findings support the idea that instant feedback enhances learning outcomes by preventing the reinforcement of incorrect usage.

3.2.3 Collaboration and Competition

The social aspects of the game were widely praised, with learners highlighting how working together and competing against peers enhanced their motivation. A participant reflected, "I loved solving puzzles with my teammates—it felt like we were all in it together." Another added, "Trying to beat my friends' scores pushed me to focus more and improve." These dynamics fostered camaraderie and friendly rivalry, which contributed to increased engagement and learning effectiveness.

3.2.4 Practical Application

The participants valued the contextual use of prepositions embedded within the gameplay. One shared, "It was so much easier to understand prepositions when I could see them used in real scenarios within the game." Another stated, "The challenges made me think about how to use prepositions properly in different situations, which helped me remember them better." This aligns with the pedagogical benefits of experiential learning, demonstrating how practical application enhances comprehension and retention.

These qualitative insights, summarised in Table 2, illustrate the multifaceted benefits of game-based learning, particularly its ability to engage learners, provide practical context, and encourage collaboration—areas that are difficult to achieve through traditional instruction.

Table 2: Summary of Key Themes from Focus Group Discussions

Theme	Example Quote	Observed Benefit
Engagement and Enjoyment	<i>“Learning felt like a fun challenge.”</i>	Increased motivation and focus
Immediate Feedback	<i>“Mistakes were corrected instantly.”</i>	Improved accuracy and retention
Collaboration and Competition	<i>“It felt like a team effort.”</i>	Enhanced social and competitive drive
Practical Application	<i>“Prepositions made sense in context.”</i>	Better comprehension and usage

3.2.5 Discussion

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that game-based learning is a highly effective method for teaching Maltese prepositions to adult learners. The significantly higher test scores achieved by the experimental group underscore the potential of interactive and immersive learning environments to enhance comprehension and long-term retention of complex linguistic concepts. These results contribute to the growing body of evidence supporting game-based approaches, echoing the work of Żammit (2024), which emphasised the potential of gamification for language acquisition.

However, this study goes beyond Żammit’s conceptual framework by providing empirical evidence through a controlled quasi-experimental design. While Żammit highlighted the theoretical advantages of integrating interactive games into the curriculum, this research validates those assertions with measurable outcomes, including quantitative test scores and qualitative insights from the learners. Despite these promising results, future research should investigate the sustained impact of game-based learning through follow-up assessments weeks or months after instruction to determine whether learning gains persist over time.

A key advantage of the game-based approach in this study was its ability to contextualize learning. Traditional methods, often characterized by rote memorization and decontextualized exercises, may hinder students from applying grammatical rules effectively (Kilimci, 2017). By embedding prepositions within *The Mdina Castle’s Treasure Quest*, learners practised prepositions in realistic and meaningful scenarios, fostering deeper understanding and retention. Żammit (2024) advocated for the contextualization of learning through gamification, but this study demonstrates how such contextualization translates into measurable improvements in academic performance.

The qualitative data further highlight the emotional and social benefits of game-based learning. Many participants expressed that the game transformed learning into an enjoyable activity, fostering intrinsic motivation and engagement. Immediate feedback within the game enabled learners to correct errors and reinforce their understanding in real time. Furthermore, collaborative and competitive elements encouraged teamwork and healthy rivalry, which created a supportive and stimulating environment.

These findings align with Żammit’s assertion that interactive games enhance motivation and engagement but differ by capturing firsthand accounts of learners’ experiences. For

example, one participant noted, “The game made prepositional learning feel like an adventure,” reflecting the positive emotional impact of the approach. This study also explored how such dynamics translate into measurable performance improvements, a dimension absent from Žammit’s work.

This study addresses a critical gap in Maltese language education, an area where innovative pedagogical strategies have been underexplored. Adult learners often face challenges in traditional learning settings, such as low engagement and difficulty retaining abstract concepts. By offering an interactive and immersive alternative, this research complements Žammit’s theoretical framework with practical evidence that game-based methods can overcome these barriers. However, given the relatively modest sample size ($n = 126$), future studies should expand participant numbers to strengthen the generalizability of these findings.

Beyond Maltese prepositional learning, the success of *The Mdina Castle’s Treasure Quest* suggests that similar game-based approaches could be applied to other languages, grammar concepts, or even non-linguistic disciplines. Elements such as problem-solving, collaboration, and immediate feedback are adaptable to diverse educational contexts, making this approach widely applicable. Žammit (2024) advocated for integrating gamification into broader curricula, and this study supports that vision by demonstrating the versatility and real-world applicability of game-based learning. Although this study focused on adult international learners, similar game-based methods could be adapted for younger students or professional language training. The immersive and interactive approach is particularly relevant for learners in multilingual environments, where traditional memorization techniques may be less effective. Future implementations should explore how different cultural backgrounds influence game-based learning effectiveness, particularly concerning linguistic structures that differ from Maltese prepositional usage.

3. Conclusion

3.1.2 Conclusion of the study

This study provides compelling evidence that game-based learning, as exemplified by *The Mdina Castle’s Treasure Quest*, is a highly effective approach for teaching Maltese prepositions to adult learners. The findings demonstrate that game-based instruction significantly outperforms traditional lecture-based methods in enhancing learning outcomes, engagement, and motivation. The interactive and immersive nature of the game allowed learners to apply grammatical concepts in meaningful and contextualised ways, fostering deeper understanding and both immediate and potential long-term retention.

These results strongly support the theoretical framework presented by Žammit (2024), which highlighted the potential of gamification to revolutionise language education by making it more engaging and learner-centred. However, this study advances her work by providing empirical validation through a controlled experimental design. While Žammit focused on the conceptual benefits of game-based learning, this research contributes concrete evidence, such as measurable performance improvements and qualitative insights from learners, demonstrating how the approach functions in practice.

Nevertheless, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The relatively small sample size and reliance on a single game-based tool may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research should expand participant numbers to enhance the statistical power and applicability

of results. Additionally, the two-month duration of the intervention allowed for the evaluation of immediate outcomes but did not capture long-term knowledge retention or skill transfer. Longitudinal studies tracking learners' retention over extended periods would be valuable in confirming the durability of game-based learning benefits. These constraints highlight the need for future studies to examine the sustained impacts of game-based learning over extended periods, incorporate larger and more diverse participant groups, and explore alternative game designs and subject areas to identify key features contributing to its success.

In addition to addressing these limitations, future research should investigate whether the motivational and engagement benefits observed in this study are consistent across different learner demographics, such as younger students or those at varying proficiency levels. Expanding the scope to include longitudinal studies and comparative analyses of multiple gamified approaches could provide further insights into optimising educational outcomes. For instance, a longitudinal study tracking participants' prepositional usage after one year would offer deeper insights into retention and transferability. Future studies should examine the effectiveness of game-based learning models across different languages and grammatical structures, identifying the elements that contribute most to learning gains. Practical implications, particularly regarding the integration of game-based learning into formal curricula and its feasibility in large-scale educational settings, should also be explored. Moreover, research could investigate how alternative digital game formats (e.g., augmented reality, virtual reality, or AI-driven adaptive learning) influence motivation and outcomes

Ultimately, this study reinforces the value of adopting innovative pedagogical strategies that leverage technology and gamification to enhance educational outcomes. By combining education with elements of interactivity, collaboration, and real-world application, game-based learning offers a transformative pathway to more effective, inclusive, and engaging teaching practices. While it builds upon the foundational insights of Żammit (2024), this study differentiates itself by moving from theoretical assertions to actionable evidence, paving the way for future advancements in education.

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