

LEARNING ENGLISH THROUGH *HEARTHSTONE*: RESEARCH ON STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND STRATEGIES

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Abstract

This research aims to describe and explain the students' perception of English learning through the card game *Hearthstone* for students in the English Studies program. In COVID-19, there has been an increase in playing time with online games, including *Hearthstone*. Spending too much time on gaming activities may be problematic, but it can also help students learn English sensibly. Thus, this research focuses on discovering students' perceptions of learning English using a collectible card game (CCG) online game. The researcher used an online survey due to physical distancing regulations in this qualitative research. Using purposive sampling, the writer chose three students from the English Studies program who played *Hearthstone* routinely during the pandemic as a source of entertainment and learning activity.

The interview result showed that all respondents generally had excellent and positive perceptions about English learning through *Hearthstone*. They were more interested and more motivated in learning English through *Hearthstone* because it was fun, enjoyable, and challenging. It also showed that all respondents had their strategies in the learning process, consisting of three steps: planning, monitoring, and evaluation. Despite its attached negative stigma, an online game like *Hearthstone* turned out to be beneficial in helping students learn English amid the COVID-19 outbreak.

Keywords: *English learning, Hearthstone, students' perception, students' strategies*

INTRODUCTION

To each their own, students generally have their preferences when learning something, especially during COVID-19. Since the Indonesian government has mandated a "lockdown" policy known as public activity restrictions (abbreviated Indonesian: PPKM) to curb the locals' movement, university students engage with the digital environment more intensely than ever. This transforming practice of the learning process might be challenging for students unprepared for the rapid change in education, not to mention the vigorous implementation of the *Merdeka Belajar-Kampus Merdeka*

(MBKM) or Freedom Learn-Independent Campus curriculum. Therefore, college students must adapt to the dynamic environment to achieve the expected competencies (Lall & Singh, 2020).

For students in English Studies, such activities as joining a club, watching movies, listening to music or podcasts, and reading fiction are some ways commonly used to help them enhance their English skills. For a few others, video games are considered a past-time activity and a joyful method for English language acquisition. It is generally believed that gaming engagement during the pandemic grows noticeably (Amin, Griffiths, & Dsouza, 2020), and educational benefits can be

obtained when the activity is done sensibly. However, it is worth noting that uncontrolled game engagement may impact poor academic performance.

Before this study, the researcher distributed an online survey to determine students' game engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. The result indicates the increased time spent on gaming and its related activities. Further, the researcher discovered that specific individuals had played video games to help them learn courses and improve their educational achievement. Interestingly, the game played by the students is relatively unpopular in Indonesia compared to other titles or other genres. While some students play educational games clearly for academic reasons, others play favorite titles such as the *Final Fantasy* series and multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) like *Mobile Legends: Bang Bang* to keep connected and relieve stress. For this study, a few students regularly play *Hearthstone* with their accounts.

Digital collectible card games (DCCG) such as *Hearthstone* (Da Silva & Goes, 2017) and *Clash Royale* (with MOBA element) have been the most popular card games globally (Liu, Zheng, Li, Bian, & Song, 2019), including in Indonesia. This esports can be easily recognized based on the typical game mechanics. Two players alternate turns, and each player sets a competitive deck of cards with minions, spells, and weapons. Players then play these cards in a battle arena to defend or attack one another. To win a match, a player must create a strategy to zero the opponent's health, and this is perhaps the most dynamic yet challenging aspect of the game.

DCCG is a rich field to conduct research related to artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning. Wang and Moh (2019) proposed improving *Hearthstone* game evaluation by presenting a game

simulation. In de Mesentier Silva et al. (2019), the researchers discuss the impacts of periodic updates on cards and strategy for *Hearthstone* players. Concerning corpus linguistics, Jacquin and Xanthos (2021) argued that linguistic evidence in *Hearthstone* could be observed in the evolution of linguistic diversity in the game's rules text. Furthermore, as a well-known trademark to global players, Bernal-Merino (2018) explored how core elements of story and gameplay in *Hearthstone*, to appeal to more international audiences, are sometimes altered by localizers, not just the words themselves. Last but not least, Türkay and Adinolf (2017) proposed a work that is arguably the most related to this study. Their investigation emphasizes how social features in *Hearthstone* impact players' motivation, wellness, and sense of community on a university campus.

The game *Hearthstone* has been extensively studied based on the abovementioned studies from a computational perspective. Considering the wide range of its game modes, from solo adventure to friendly challenge, *Hearthstone* has a lot of tales to tell and interactive social chat with players around the globe. As a game, *Hearthstone* offers players a chance to learn about its unique environment and explore new things simultaneously. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the players, in this case, who are the students' perceptions and learning strategies in playing *Hearthstone* with the impetus of language learning. This study will provide an outlook not on how the game encourages players to create a plan for playing but on how language learners generate a process to learn English through the game and what they think about it.

Literature Review

Metacognitive Learning Strategies

Saks and Leijen (2018) argued that metacognitive strategies, developed by O'Malley and Chamot in 1990, entail interaction and authority of effect to enhance learning. Metacognitive strategies are automated strategies in which students can make plans, monitor plans, and even evaluate programs early on what is planned. In the English learning context, this learning system raises students' awareness of thinking by understanding its meaning when demonstrating English language skills. This awareness is needed in the learning process, especially in English as a foreign language, because the teacher acts more as a student-centered facilitator. Students are also required to always have independence in learning. This strategy is one way to grow and increase awareness of students' thinking processes. This process automatically arouses curiosity because learners use their cognitive to contemplate the language acquisition process.

The metacognitive strategy consists of three stages: (1) *Planning* is done by preparing and understanding the conditions to help the student learn. This stage has a crucial role at the beginning of learning because it will determine the following two steps; (2) *Monitoring* refers to checking to understand what is being read and heard, checking pronunciation and grammatical accuracy, or expressing opinions when the discussion is taking place. In addition, the monitoring process can foster student awareness and independence in learning; (3) *Evaluation* is carried out to check the results achieved by students when they have completed their knowledge. The evaluation results of students' activities are constantly developed and linked to other skills, namely reading, writing, and listening,

always to connect one learning process with other integrated methods.

This metacognitive strategy is beneficial in assessing and correcting all learning activities and students' language abilities. Students do not feel pressured, do not feel cornered when they make mistakes or are not optimal in learning, and more importantly, students can be aware of weaknesses and errors when using a foreign language. Each stage has indicators to see how metacognitive strategies are implemented, namely the learning objectives. In addition, metacognitive skills are the ability to reflect on how someone thinks. The critical behavior of a student's metacognitive strategy is reflected in monitoring skills and learning abilities (Hamsia, 2018).

Hearthstone

Blizzard Entertainment developed and launched *Hearthstone* in early 2014 as a turn-based digital collectible card game. Players construct their decks by choosing one hero out of ten hero classes and competing in one versus one duel. Players try to win over their opponents by bringing their health points from 30 to 0. They can achieve this objective by spending an amount of *mana* to play cards from their hand. The amount of mana given to each player increases every turn (up to 10) by default. Some influential cards can be accessed with much mana, and as the game progresses further, the more complex each turn. At the beginning of each turn, every player draws a new card until their deck is empty, resulting in *fatigue* damage. It is worth noting that each card, such as minion, spell, or weapon, has unique effects, which the players can use to their advantage (Dockhorn & Mostaghim, 2019).

Blizzard adds new cards, game modes, and mechanics in regular updates. The initial game was launched in only two playable ways, but the number has increased to ten over the years. From Standard to Solo Adventures, these various game modes offer players an enigma to explore. The primary entertainment of *Hearthstone*, “Standard,” is the most basic and popular game mode. Nowadays, it is the one most people play, and it is also the one streamers broadcast. With the periodic updates, players need to invest some effort and time to keep up with the Standard mode of *Hearthstone*. They need to do daily or weekly quests if they do not want to get involved in any microtransaction.

Furthermore, Adventure mode is a single-player game mode where players participate in adventure-themed matches against computer-controlled opponents. Players can select Adventures on the Solo Adventures screen and access it from the main menu through the Solo Adventures button. Players will learn more about a character—both acclaimed legends from *Warcraft* lore and new heroes from *Hearthstone* in solo adventures. Adventures offer players a particular way to play the game. Unlike other play modes, each tale has a unique theme, featuring heroes, cards, art, and music in keeping with that setting, including some cards and game mechanics not playable in the Standard mode.



Figure 1. Adventure mode allows players to travel with notable *Warcraft* heroes, retelling their stories in a *Hearthstone* style

The player's decks and other factors can somehow affect the game length and game experience in the current game. Some decks depend on offensive strategies, whereas others use flexible combinations to dominate the game. In addition, the game also promotes social features that can engage players with others. These features include game chat, friends' requests and activities, and emotes during battle. This social aspect can affect players' reason for playing and mental well-being (Türkay & Adinolf, 2019).

METHOD

This study is descriptive research carried out by conducting an online survey from a class of 2019 in the English Studies Program, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Padjadjaran. Since the author could not engage in physical contact due to the country's slow vaccination rollout and public activity restrictions, online questionnaires and interviews were used as data collection techniques, with the samples of three selected students from the class of 2019. All of the participants are male with Bahasa Indonesia as their native language, and they are around B1-level English students.

While close-ended questions made up the questionnaire, a semi-structured interview was used to gather data from the respondents. According to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2017), the former instrument allows researchers to systematize the data. It was organized to discover participants' general perceptions and motivation regarding learning English through the game. The author created a Likert-scale questionnaire. The data were obtained through five choices that range from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). The participants were directed to select one of the options reflecting their

views. The subsequent evaluation used Microsoft Excel to elicit the result.

In addition to the questionnaire, a semi-structured interview was used to explore students' strategies and invoke their reasoning on how playing *Hearthstone* can be beneficial for English learning. Brown and Danaher (2019) state that a semi-structured approach would effectively offer thoughtful reflexivity for the study. Expert judgment in students' perception and English Language Teaching (ELT) validated the instruments.

The author used Google Forms to distribute the questionnaire and Zoom Meeting to host the virtual interview. Purposive sampling was applied to administer the research instrument because the research subjects fit *Hearthstone* players' profiles. The three selected participants were filtered from the initial survey, and they gave their consent to participate in this research. The collected data were then identified and interpreted descriptively.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Data acquired through questionnaires were presented as students' perceptions and motivation towards playing *Hearthstone* (HS) as an English learning activity. Perception in this study relates to students' level of interest and likeness during the learning process when playing the game. Motivation is the motive to be engaged in a related activity. English learning is described as the knowledge and skills gained attributed to students' involvement in the activity. The data overview of students' perceptions is presented in the following chart:

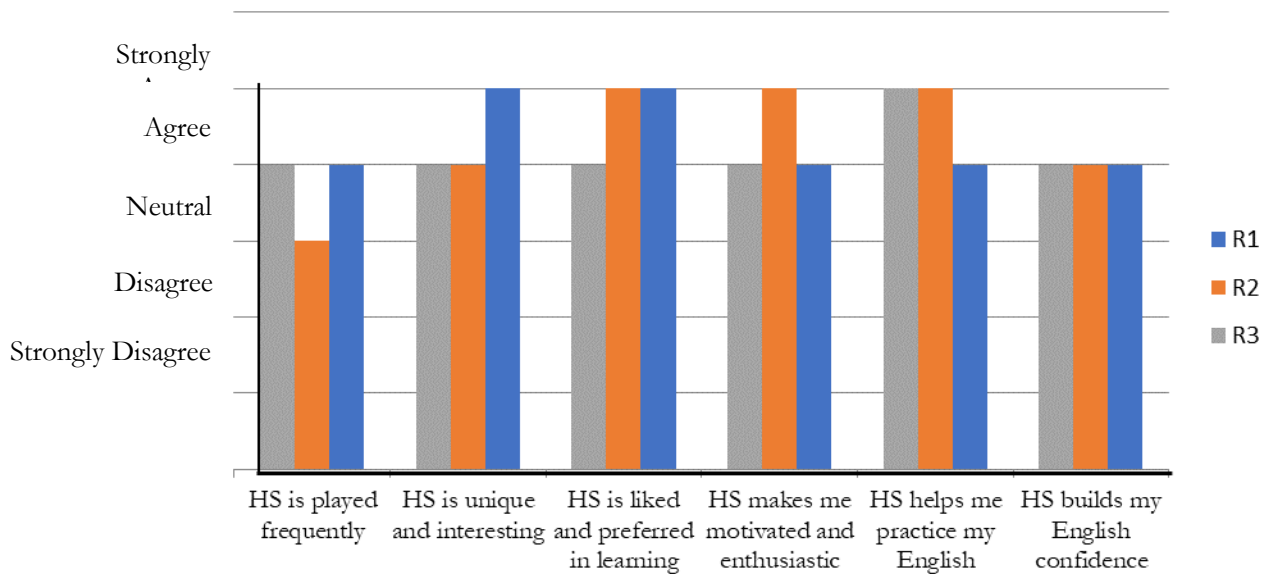


Figure 2. Visual information describing students' perceptions on English learning through *Hearthstone*

The questionnaire aimed to examine the extent to which students perceive the game of *Hearthstone* as a learning activity and motivation for English subjects. Whether English Studies or English Education, apprehensiveness in expressing an opinion or random information in English is prevalent for students in English major. Therefore, students must break this barrier of fear using something that they are typically fond of: video games. When appropriately applied, learning English while playing a game is plausible. Some learners get motivated and improve language learning through digital video games (Ebrahimzadeh & Sepideh, 2017). This premise is supported by the findings from the data above that show two vital themes related to students' perception of *Hearthstone* in English learning: (1) engagement and enjoyment and (2) knowledge learning. These two themes are examined as the primary topic of this study.

The data suggest that the participants played *Hearthstone* at regular intervals. They agreed that the game is fascinating and set solidly in the famous *Warcraft* universe, unlike other card games. It gave students opportunities to play the game and learn English with pleasure. All three participants reported that *Hearthstone* positively impacted engagement in English learning, and they preferred such fun to be involved in lectures. One of the reasons this game fostered student engagement in English learning is the availability of their most preferable gameplay. Participants could play together with their in-game friends or choose to complete the story mode of solo adventure alone. Key points that emerged from the data were the importance of interest and enjoyment.

All participants accepted that *Hearthstone* was a valuable and motivating game to help them learn English. The researcher found positive feedback regarding how the game assisted

their learning through the interview. They expressed that playing *Hearthstone* outside school hours allowed them to recollect previously taught material and learn new things. They shared that the game increased their vocabulary, reading, and listening skills. Knowing that playing a game is supported in language learning also prompted the students to do well in both activities. The participants particularly enjoyed playing the game when they found relevant material from lectures. At the same time, they were exposed to more complex structures and offered to practice their English skills. The student could contact anyone worldwide as a player, which pushed them to use English when chatting or reading the intriguing game story. The key benefits of this theme were how *Hearthstone* initiated dialogue and helped the students preserve their material understanding.

Regarding the result of students' responses to the questionnaire, it is evident that Students accept *Hearthstone* as a positive supporting media in learning English. The game also provides English contexts in textual and audio forms that can be learned anytime they get engaged. When the game positively impacts students' learning experiences, it is essential to know more about how the participants achieved educational benefits. Therefore, the next part will discuss the strategy used by participants in learning English while playing *Hearthstone*, in which the data were taken from the interview.

Discussion

The interview outcomes show that *Hearthstone* motivated students to learn English to be competitive and encouraged interaction in the game. Top ranks and in-game rewards were among the biggest motivation for the participants to do well in the game. On top of that, the opportunity to practice English in the virtual competition drove them to play *Hearthstone*. However, it is also found that long hours, strong opponents, or toxic players could invoke distraction or distress that might result in ineffective learning experiences. To tackle this, participants can minimize the negative consequences by reducing the game's playtime and devoting more attention to English learning at each *Hearthstone* session.

Students admitted that playing *Hearthstone* positively affected gaining knowledge and attaining English skills. Students later stated that improving their English proficiency and adding social connections reinforced their learning in the activity. In particular, student 1 felt that playing the game to refine his English was an exciting learning experience. He was confident to chat with friends using English and was not afraid of lexical inaccuracy or grammatical mistakes like in traditional classroom settings. Additionally, student 2 stated that *Hearthstone* helped enhance vocabulary because of numerous uncommon words. He once thought that the game's bread and butter term "deathrattle" is a venomous snake species and "mulligan" is a person's name.



Figure 3. *The screenshot of Hearthstone: Fractured in Alterac Valley launched worldwide in December 2021, bringing new stories and new cards*

Different activities such as reading articles about gameplay strategy and online streaming were crucial factors that helped him with his vocabulary. Student 3 mentioned that he liked to play the solo adventure more because of its epic story. The theme and the story, music, and voice acting were so well written and performed that it would delight any casual player, including him. He highlighted the opportunity to learn English pronunciation and practice listening by playing *Hearthstone* adventures.

For this study, students' responses to learning strategy are elaborated to reinforce the research topic; therefore, the researcher classifies the data into three steps of O'Malley and Chamot's metacognitive learning strategies as a guiding framework: *Planning*, *Monitoring*, and *Evaluating* (Saks & Leijen, 2018) that is described in the following section.

Planning

In the first step of the metacognitive learning strategy, all respondents planned their English learning by preparing peripherals and allocating the time they usually spent in *Hearthstone*.

"I learn English through Hearthstone in my free time, when I (was) back from college or on weekends." (Student 1)

"I usually prepare the internet connection and my personal computer and also an online dictionary." (Student 2)

"I prepare internet connection, laptop, earphones, and Google Translate." (Student 3)

Even though the game is best experienced when played using a computer, the game also runs on Androids, meaning students can alternately play on a bed, sofa, or even in the bathroom. However, the necessity of a reliable internet connection and dictionary remains strong. Learning English is not the only motive for the students to play the game. Besides the fun deck-building process, honing skills and maintaining a social network were the main factors that drove students to start the game. Student 3 particularly enjoys the game's sense of humor, and he finds the game offers exciting pop culture references from *World of Warcraft's* perspective. Nowadays,

many players worldwide stream their games via YouTube or Twitch, allowing students to learn to play from the best players before engaging with the game. In another case, when student 1 wants to see how his buddies are doing, he spectates a friend playing the game in real-time and starts chatting afterward.

Monitoring

All respondents examined what they gained after learning English through *Hearthstone* and their problems in this step.

“I got new friends as well as a new experience, and I could practice my writing skills when chatting. The problem is that the game sometimes crashes and it is terrible.” (Student 1)

“It is irritating when my computer was not working properly such as unresponsive keyboard or mouse, and slow internet connection. However, I learned a lot of vocabulary from the game.” (Student 2)

“Since there is no teacher to guide you, it is individual learning. You learn it by yourself, improve it by yourself. Thus, if you have questions on your mind, the only thing you can ask is Google.” (Student 3)

Students 1 and 2 mentioned that their strategy in learning English involves much reading of the game description, items, skills, and mechanics to collect new vocabulary and try to practice their English by chatting with other players globally. As a solo adventurer, student 3 began his activity by reading the story presented on each hero. As he reads and is exposed to new words, he tries to work out the meaning from the context and find the

definition in a dictionary. Students 1 and 2 were also concerned with the loading problems and connection issues during the game, while student 3 mentioned *Hearthstone* let him explore and learn things at his own pace.

Evaluation

All students evaluated their English learning when playing *Hearthstone* in the final step. All participants stated that they occasionally asked their in-game friends or their classmates after the game about their English. The valuable feedback received was then reflected and self-evaluated. For example, upon acquiring new vocabulary or expression from the game, students will apply it to courses and daily conversations in the future. They sometimes discussed gameplay strategies with their friends to retain their knowledge.

All in all, *Hearthstone* positively influences students' involvement, motivation, and English practice and learning. While these findings confirm that video games, particularly *Hearthstone*, are beneficial for English learning, there are remaining challenges related to the time needed to allocate, technologies arrangement, choosing appropriate content, and earning helpful feedback. Therefore, students need to structure game plans to give game time carefully. Students are encouraged to consider these challenges in establishing sustainable gameplay, particularly the potential benefits of using video games for English learning.

CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, there was a positive perception of the students on the use of *Hearthstone* in English learning. It can be observed that *Hearthstone* gave students opportunities to practice their English proficiency. As a result, the game is perceived positively by students as it

helps them improve their linguistic skills (especially reading, listening, and vocabulary) and develop their cognitive abilities. It also had advantages in creating a fun learning experience contributing to learning engagement.

As for the English learning strategies, students used different procedures in the three stages. This study also indicates that the learning strategies applied should be evaluated for their effectiveness in completing language skills tasks and obtaining productive feedback. Furthermore, this study suggests that students prefer different approaches when playing the game for specific language learning, such as in-game chat to practice writing, story mode to enhance reading, and related game activities to improve vocabulary. Thus, instructors should promote learning strategies that are suitable for each student.

All in all, this study outcomes show that *Hearthstone* motivated students to engage and encourage English interaction in the game. Naturally, this contextual learning forced students to interact with other people using English. Therefore, with appropriate context and helpful feedback, *Hearthstone* allows students to use the knowledge they gain in classrooms, or vice versa, to practice and enhance their English. However, students felt that *Hearthstone* could sometimes capture their focus and interest during the learning process. Some phrases and vocabularies from the game hardly have practical value for real-life situations. Last but not least, despite this research merit, there is a need for a larger sample size to validate these works.

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