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A systematic review of board games used in language learning contexts

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KEY POINTS

Background: Board games are a promising tool for integrating games into the classroom setting, yet research on their effectiveness is sparse.

Aim: This systematic review examines empirical research on board games used for language learning. The participants, instructional approach, research methods, and outcomes for these studies are reviewed to provide suggestions for further research.

Methods: The review synthesizes findings from empirical studies, analyzing how board games are implemented in language teaching contexts. Studies were grouped based on their instructional design, research methodology, and language learning focus to identify common trends and gaps in the literature.

Results: Findings indicate that board games are used to support vocabulary acquisition, grammar reinforcement, communicative competence, and reading comprehension, while also fostering motivation and reducing anxiety.

Conclusion: Board games offer a promising tool for language learning, but their effectiveness depends on pedagogical implementation, learner engagement, and instructional context. The review concludes with pedagogical implications and recommendations for future research, particularly in understanding how board games can be optimized for long-term language acquisition and integrated with other teaching methods.

TWEET

🎲 Board games are a powerful tool for language learning! This review explores how they support **vocabulary, grammar, communication, & motivation**, with studies showing both **explicit & implicit learning benefits**. Future research? Maximizing long-term gains! #LanguageLearning #GameBasedLearning



1. Introduction

Integrating games into educational settings has long been viewed as a cure-all for boredom and motivation (Malone, 1981, McCallum, 1980). If students are not engaged in a particular lesson or topic a teacher might try to add a game to manufacture interest and or engagement. In the field of second/foreign language (L2) learning and teaching, the use of games can take on two primary distinct forms depending on how one conceptualizes language learning. For example, if language learning is viewed as the simple linear accumulation of grammar facts and vocabulary over time, one may place stronger emphasis on explicit instruction and subsequently view games as a means to help students through the arduous tasks of memorizing large vocabulary lists and grammar tables. However, if language learning is viewed as happening in contextualized, communicative exchanges, one may emphasize more implicit approaches to learning. Such approaches may leverage games to create environments where language is used to exchange ideas, strategies, and show intentions. While the explicit instruction approach may lean harder on the entertainment function of games, both approaches undoubtedly see 'fun' as a strong benefit of bringing games into the classroom.

1.1. Game definition

Before going much further it is important to first establish what a game is and is not. While it has been argued that defining games is somewhat arbitrary (Schell, 2020), it is important for this article, and I believe for the field to clearly state how we conceptualize these learning tools. Games are often defined as having a set of rules that constrain what is possible in the game, a clear quantifiable outcome, and some artificial conflict to overcome (Clark, et al., 2016; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). One of the more commonly used definitions states that games are "an attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by rules, where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favor of less efficient means, and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity" (Suits, 1978, p. 95). In other words, the activity within a game is socially constructed and system bound by mutually agreed upon rules. Success in a game is thus an exploration of and experimentation with the rules to reach an agreed upon win state.

Burgun (2013) expands on these definitions by arguing that games involve a balance between randomness and skill. He argues that activities that determine winners based on randomness alone should be described as lotteries (e.g. Bingo), while those that are determined solely on skill should be viewed as competitions (e.g. Kahoot Quizzes). He further argues that activities without clear conflict and objectives should be viewed as simulations (e.g. Role Play). It is important to establish these definitions, because activities with each of these characteristics have often been described as games in the language learning context. From this definition, a board game like Chutes and Ladders would best be described as a lottery system since progression through the board is solely dependent on a role of the dice. Similarly, a flashcard game in which players get points for correctly translating a word would be considered a competition rather than a game (we may also call this gamification see further down). These differences have important implications for education. Namely, if we bring an activity into the classroom that is a competition rather than a game, we should not be surprised when the smartest, most talented students win most of the time and subsequently get most of the benefit from the experience. Likewise, if we try to sell a lottery system as a game, we should not be surprised when a drop in motivation and interest in the activity coincides with students' realization that their choices and actions do not impact the outcome of the activity.

"if we bring an activity into the classroom that is a competition rather than a game, we should not be surprised when the smartest, most talented students win most of the time and subsequently get most of the benefit from the experience"

Randomness within games is often integrated into the system of rules that bound what is possible within the game. Randomness in games allows for experimentation and exploration of strategies that best lead towards success. Take the game *Catan* as an example. In *Catan* players strategically select places on a board to receive resources throughout the game that are needed to build roads, towns and cities. Each resource is identified with a number between 1 and 12 and a player will receive a resource if their house is on a number that is rolled (using two dice). Thus there is *skill* and *strategy* in recognizing that 6s and 8s will be rolled the most (7s do not count for resources) and that resources

with less frequent numbers will be in high demand. Although *skill* is important, some players can do really well on certain occasions when 10s and 11s hit abnormally high (just ask my 6 year old). This element of *randomness* not only gives less skilled players a chance to win, but it often keeps everyone involved in the game until the end. This is extremely important for education and language learning.

Another important distinction to be made is between games and gamification. Although the gamified activities are often referred to as games, they are, by definition, not games. Gamification is defined as the application of game elements to a non-game activity or task. Most of the time these game elements refer to badges, leaderboards, levels, achievements and points (Nicholson, 2012). In other words, gamified activities are activities that have been turned into *competitions* via commonly used game elements. This paper is primarily concerned with board games and thus will not explore gamification, competition-based activities, lottery systems, and/or simulations.

In the last five years there have been several systematic reviews on digital-game-based language learning (e.g., Li et al., 2023; Poole, et al., 2020; Zou, et al, 2021). Additionally, Dixon, et al., (2022) conducted a meta-analysis on the use of digital games for language learning and reported a small to medium effect on language learning, which was often characterized by vocabulary learning. These systematic reviews on *digital games* not only reflect the rise in research on digital games used for language learning, but also demonstrates a bias towards digital games in the field of game-based language learning. York et al., (2021) argue that the game-based language learning field has essentially been absorbed by DGBLL and as such the term “game” has become synonymous with digital games. The authors call for a re-roll of the field with a new name, *Ludic Language Pedagogy*. This new field, they argue, should be more balanced and include digital and analog games and further that it should place a focus on teaching practices around games rather than on the design of games. In this systematic review, I set out to explore some of the key differences that are seen between research on board games and those on digital games.

1.2. Why board games?

Placing a stronger emphasis on teaching and subsequently learning that occurs in the classroom aligns with a shift towards board games over digital games. To put it simply, board games are more practical for classroom integration. They do not require that everyone has a computer and a copy of the digital game, they do not require computer literacies, and perhaps most importantly they are more easily adaptable to the classroom context (Vegel & Hill, 2024). In other words, unlike digital games many board games can be reproduced with pencil and paper and the content could subsequently be adapted (as we'll see some studies do) to the content being learned. Doing this with a digital game would require that the game be mod-able (able to modify) and that the teacher have some programming skills and/or a lot of time to make the edits.

In addition to these advantages, board games encourage natural turn taking in a physical environment (Poole, et al. 2019). Both of these inherent features in board games are valuable for language learning given the role of facial expressions and hand gestures in facilitating comprehension. In digital games it is possible that players bypass all need to use language skills or even communicate with other players. Although there are several potential benefits to using board games in the language classroom, there is much less research on these games compared to digital games. Thus, this study set out to review the current state of the field on board games being used for language teaching and learning purposes.

2. Past systematic reviews

As mentioned above, several systematic reviews have explored digital games' effect on language learning, with one review simply exploring the impact of digital games on vocabulary learning. There is much less research that focuses on board games. Bayeck (2020) conducted a literature review on board games used in general education to explore some of the affordances of board games and there has been one systematic review that explored the use of board games for promoting speaking skills for EFL learners (Wong & Yunus, 2021). Wong and Yunus identified 35 studies between 2017 and 2021 but only focused on English language learners and more specifically on how board games impacted speaking skills. Their review argued that board games have been shown to support speaking fluency, pronunciation, grammar, and motivation. However, their study was not clear on what a board game is and how the board games impacted learning. Thus, this review will explore the use of board games for all language learners, but will focus more specifically on a) the types of games used, b) how the games

were implemented into the classroom, c) the language teaching aspect that was targeted by the game, and finally d) the outcomes.

3. Current systematic review

This systematic review was conducted following the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Page et al., 2021). The PRISMA framework provides a structured approach for identifying, screening, and including relevant studies while also ensuring transparency and reproducibility for future research. A four-phase diagram is used to detail the number of studies identified, included, and excluded at each stage (see Figure 1). In the initial search the following databases were used: *Education Source*, *Psycinfo*, *ERIC* and *Google Scholar*. The search string used can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Search Terms

"board game" OR "tabletop game" OR "analog game"	"language learning" OR "second language learning" OR "foreign language learning"
AND	

In the next phase, journals that are known to publish gaming research were manually searched. This included the following journals (*Ludic Language Pedagogy*, *Simulation & Gaming*, *International Journal of Game-based Learning*, and *Games and Culture*). Finally, of studies identified that used board games, the reference lists were searched in a snowballing approach to find more articles. Through these three phases 191 articles were identified (See Figure 1). Next, the inclusion/exclusion criteria were applied.

3.1. Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

Studies found and evaluated in this literature search were included if they met all the following criteria:

1. Language: The study was written in English.
2. Time Period: 2000-2024.
3. Journal and/or Conference Proceedings: Peer-Reviewed.
 - i. Unpublished studies were excluded.
 - ii. Dissertations and Theses were excluded.
4. Studies that investigate the effect of playing a board game on L2 learning were included.
 - i. Studies that investigated beliefs about board games in general as a learning tool were excluded.
 - ii. For example, studies that asked if students would like board games in their classroom, rather than investigating a specific game were excluded.
5. The board game used in the study is a game per the definition used in this review.

After applying the criteria for inclusion/exclusion 19 articles for review remained. Figure 1 outlines the entire search process.

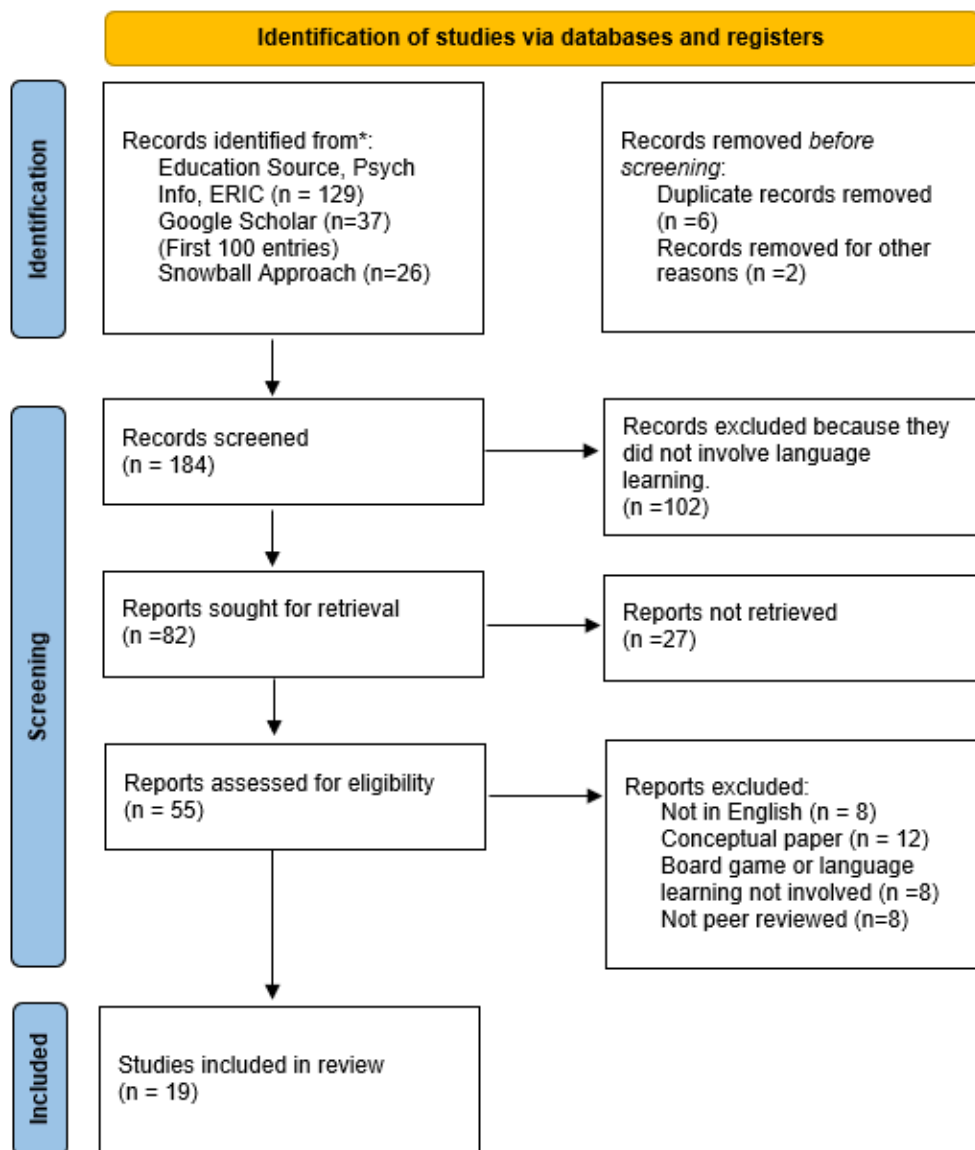


Figure 1 PRISMA Visual of Systematic Search

3.2. Structure of the Review

This systematic review examines the role of board games in second and foreign language learning by analyzing empirical studies across multiple dimensions. See Table 2 for all studies included in this review. First, an overview of the languages and contexts in which board games have been researched is presented. Next, the type of board games used in these studies including the use of commercial, adapted, and researcher-designed board games are reviewed. Following this, the research design and methodology section categorizes studies based on quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods approaches. Then the review distinguishes between explicit and implicit approaches to language learning that occurred within the board games. Finally, language learning outcomes are presented.

Table 2. Studies included in this review

Author	Language	Country	Sample Size	Context
Chao & Fan (2020)	EFL	Taiwan	48	K-12
Chen (2021)	EFL	Taiwan	58	College
Fotini & Makrina (2017)	EFL	Greece	8	K-12
Fung & Min (2015)	EFL	Malaysia	60	College

Author	Language	Country	Sample Size	Context
Hsu & Liang (2021)	EFL	Taiwan	48	K-12
Konzett (2015)	EFL	Austria	3	K-12
Lee (2016)	EFL	Malaysia	30	K-12
Łodzikowski & Jekiel (2019)	EFL	Poland	29	College
Luk (2013)	EFL	Hong Kong	3	K-12
Mattheoudakis & Panteliou (2022)	Greek	Greece	72	Adult
Metom, Alfred Tom, Joe, & Rozaimie, (2019)	EFL	Malaysia	16	College
Paris & Yussof, (2013)	EFL	Malaysia	115	College
Poole, Clarke-Midura, Sun, & Lam, (2019)	Chinese	USA	40	K-12
Reid (2024)	EFL	Japan	3	College
Sasidharan & Eng (2013)	EFL	Malaysia	56	K-12
Smith (2006)	EFL	UK	18	K-12
Wen, Do, Liu, Lin, & Huang (2020)	Chinese	Taiwan	34	College
York (2020a)	EFL	Japan	115	College
York (2020b)	EFL	Japan	9	College

4. Results of the review

4.1 Where and with whom are board games being researched?

Age Group. A large portion of research on board games for language learning has been conducted in primary and secondary school settings. This is in direct contrast to research on digital games which has largely focused on adult learners in university settings (Poole & Clarke-Midura, 2020). Chao and Fan (2020) examined the use of *Halli Galli* and *Alles Tomate* in a fifth-grade Taiwanese EFL classroom. Similarly, Fotini and Makrina (2017) studied six-year-old Greek EFL learners playing games such as *Chutes and Ladders*, *UNO*, and *Operation* to reinforce vocabulary learning. Poole, et al. (2019) used a researcher designed game called *Mystery Forest* to teach math and mandarin in a second grade Chinese immersion classroom. Sasidharan and Eng (2013) also worked with elementary learners using a life-size board game called *Challenge*. At the secondary level, Konzett (2015) explored peer-assessment practices among teenage French learners playing a verb conjugation board game.

Board game-based learning has also been explored in higher education and adult language learning contexts. Chen (2021) conducted an action research study with Taiwanese university students, in which learners designed their own board games to enhance L2 motivation and engagement. Łodzikowski and Jekiel (2019) examined board games with advanced university-level EFL learners studying English prosody. In adult education, Mattheoudakis and Panteliou (2022) investigated board games as a tool for teaching Greek as an L2 to learners aged 18 to 70.

Target Language. These studies have also involved a few different language learning environments, including, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Greek, and Chinese. Most studies focused on EFL learners, particularly in Asia and Europe. Fung and Min (2016) conducted a quasi-experimental study in Malaysia, where low-proficiency EFL learners played *What Say You* to develop speaking fluency. Similarly, Hsu and Liang (2021) studied Taiwanese elementary school students using a board game combined with computational thinking tasks. Paris and Yussof (2013) investigated board games for teaching English grammar to Malaysian ESL students, while Reid (2024) examined the use of *Coup*, *Fluxx*, and *Pandemic* in a Japanese university EFL course, highlighting the benefits of strategic, multiplayer interactions for language development.

Although most research focuses on EFL learners, some studies have examined board game use in learning other languages, Mattheoudakis and Panteliou (2022) studied Greek as an L2. Wen et al. (2020) compared board games with flashcards for learning Mandarin Chinese. Finally, Poole et al. (2019) explored board game-based language learning in a dual-language immersion (DLI) program in

the United States, where second-grade students played *Mystery Forest* to develop Chinese language skills alongside mathematics.

Context. Another key consideration is whether board games are integrated into formal classroom instruction or used in extracurricular settings. Many studies implement board games within structured classroom settings, often as a supplementary tool for instruction. Paris and Yussof (2013), Fotini and Makrina (2017), and York (2020a, 2020b) all used board games in physical classroom environments, demonstrating that they can be effectively integrated into lesson plans. In these cases, board games were often preceded by pre-teaching of vocabulary and/or grammar and followed by post-game reflection activities. York (2020b) integrated a board game activity into a university course, using a task-based framework. In this framework, students used self-transcription, video analysis, and error correction tasks in the post task phase to analyze task performance. York's findings show that when gameplay is embedded within a structured cycle of reflection and repetition, learners demonstrate gains in output accuracy. This is particularly important given that one of the shortcomings of research around digital games for language learning is the lack of integration into classroom settings.

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Fewer studies explored board games in informal or extracurricular learning environments, where learners engage in gameplay outside of classroom instruction. Luk (2013) studied after-school board game sessions in a Hong Kong ESL program, showing that students who acted as game facilitators developed greater self-regulation and interactional competence than those who only played the games. Similarly, Reid (2024) examined board games in a university extracurricular setting, where learners used strategy-based games to engage in collaborative dialogues and negotiation of meaning. These findings suggest that extracurricular board game play may provide valuable opportunities for language practice, though structured guidance may be necessary to ensure meaningful language use.

4.2 Types of board games being used

Several studies examined the effectiveness of commercially available board games in language learning without making pedagogical modifications. Mattheoudakis and Panteliou (2022) used *Dixit* and *Time's Up*, which are both commercially available board games, to focus on past tense forms with Greek as L2 learners. While unmodified board games can provide authentic, immersive experiences, some studies have noted challenges such as the lack of alignment with curricular goals and in some cases inconsistent learning outcomes. For instance, Reid (2024) examined three commercially available games (*Coup*, *Fluxx*, and *Pandemic*) in a university EFL setting and found that while these games generated meaningful interactions, they did not necessarily lead to explicit grammar or vocabulary development without additional instructional support.

To better align with learning objectives, some researchers have adapted existing commercial board games for educational use. Paris and Yussof (2013) adapted the *Time Trap* board game to reinforce English verb tenses. Students engaged in structured grammar tasks while playing, including forming sentences, answering questions, and correcting errors. Findings indicated greater improvement in grammar accuracy compared to a control group, demonstrating the potential of structured adaptations in language-focused board game interventions.

Most studies have explored the use of board games specifically designed for language learning, often integrating pedagogical principles directly into their mechanics. Poole et al. (2019) developed *Mystery Forest*, a cooperative board game designed to support both mathematics and Chinese language learning in a dual-language immersion program. The study highlighted the benefits of embedding language into game tasks rather than treating language as an external requirement. Sasidharan and Eng (2013) designed the board game *CHALLENGE* to promote content and English language learning. Similarly, Metom, et al., (2019) designed *Vocathon* using principles from multiple intelligences to promote English vocabulary learning for students in Malaysia.

4.3 Explicit vs implicit language learning in board games

Research on board game-based language learning also differs by the theoretical orientation applied to the use of games. For instance, some studies align more with explicit language teaching in which learners receive direct instruction on linguistic forms, and others more closely follow an implicit language teaching approach in which language acquisition occurs incidentally through interaction and meaningful communication (For more on the distinction between explicit and implicit learning, see Godfroid and Coss, In Press).

Explicit language learning involves conscious focus on linguistic structures, often supported by direct instruction, corrective feedback, and metalinguistic explanations. Studies in this category typically pre-teach vocabulary or grammar, structure gameplay to reinforce specific forms, or integrate explicit assessment tasks. Several studies explicitly focus on reinforcing grammar and vocabulary learning through structured board game tasks. For example, Paris and Yussof (2013) examined the *Time Trap* board game, which was explicitly designed to reinforce English verb tenses (simple present, present progressive, simple past, past progressive). Konzett (2015) explored a French verb conjugation board game which asked learners to collaboratively assess and correct verb forms while playing. Łodzikowski and Jekiel (2019) implemented a phonetics training board game (*Stress Run, Stress Maze, Phono Tactics*) that focused on English prosody, stress patterns, and phonotactics in an advanced EFL classroom.

Implicit language learning occurs incidentally through gameplay, where learners acquire linguistic forms naturally through interaction, negotiation of meaning, and social engagement. Studies in this category focus on authentic communication, peer interaction, and meaning-focused tasks rather than direct instruction. Some studies explore board games as tools for fostering spontaneous, meaning-focused interaction. Poole et al. (2019) examined *Mystery Forest*, a cooperative role-playing board game used in a Chinese dual-language immersion (DLI) classroom. The study used content analysis of recorded gameplay, showing that students naturally incorporated Chinese while solving game challenges. Language use evolved from basic arithmetic-related terms to complex strategic discussions, illustrating how task-based board games foster organic language use. Reid (2024) analyzed language-related episodes (LREs) in gameplay, finding that while strategy-based games like *Pandemic* and *Fluxx* encouraged natural negotiation of meaning, they did not consistently elicit explicit language-focused discussions. Luk (2013) also explored the use of commercially designed board games to support language instruction and found that the game afforded much creativity in language use, negotiation of meaning, and supported communication via non-verbal resources (e.g. gesturing, pointing). Studies that take a more implicit orientation tend to focus on how board games support collaboration, authentic language use during gameplay, and the impact of being in a physical environment on communication.

Some studies integrate both explicit and implicit learning approaches, leveraging structured game mechanics while encouraging meaningful interaction. For instance, Hsu and Liang (2021) combined explicit instruction with an interdisciplinary board game that integrated English learning and computational thinking. York (2020) implemented a task-based language teaching framework, where students learned rules through instructional videos (explicit learning), played games (*Spyfall, Codenames*) in authentic interaction settings (implicit learning), and engaged in post-game review sessions (explicit focus on form). These studies suggest that hybrid approaches, where learners engage in communicative gameplay with structured support, may maximize the benefits of both explicit accuracy-focused instruction and implicit fluency-building activities.

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4.4 Research design and methodology in studies investigating board games

Research on board game-based language learning employs a variety of methodological approaches, ranging from quantitative experimental studies that measure learning gains to qualitative studies exploring interaction patterns and learner perceptions. Many studies adopt mixed methods approaches, integrating both quantitative and qualitative analyses to provide a more comprehensive

understanding of how board games impact language learning. This section categorizes the research design and methodology used in empirical studies into three primary approaches: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods studies.

Experimental and quasi-experimental studies typically compare a board game intervention group with a control group receiving traditional instruction. For example, Fotini and Makrina (2017) conducted a quasi-experimental study on vocabulary acquisition among six-year-old Greek EFL learners. The researchers compared an experimental group using board games with a control group following a traditional coursebook-based approach. Wen et al. (2020) compared an educational board game (*Conveyance GO*) with flashcard-based instruction for Mandarin Chinese learners, using pre- and post-tests to measure vocabulary retention. Many studies using experimental and quasi-experimental methods rely on t-tests, ANOVA, and regression analyses to compare pre- and post-test scores and examine statistically significant differences between groups.

Some quantitative studies focus on students' perceptions of board games using structured surveys and Likert-scale questionnaires. For example, Metom et al. (2019) conducted a survey-based study on the educational board game *Vocathon*, using Likert-scale questionnaires to assess student engagement and perceived usefulness. While 81.3% of students enjoyed the game, the study lacked pre- and post-test measures to assess actual vocabulary retention. Similarly, Sasidharan and Eng (2013) also measured student perceptions of speaking improvement after playing a board game, but did not capture any actual learning data.

Qualitative studies often focus on interaction patterns during gameplay, investigating how learners engage in peer scaffolding, negotiation of meaning, and corrective feedback. For example, Konzett (2015) conducted a conversation analysis study on French learners playing a grammar-focused board game, examining how students used multimodal cues (gaze, gestures, body posture) to collaboratively assess and correct verb conjugations. Smith (2006) used microgenetic analysis to investigate peer interaction in bilingual learners playing board games, finding that students engaged in repetition, recasting, and corrective feedback to co-construct linguistic knowledge. Reid (2024) analyzed language-related episodes (LREs) in a Japanese university setting, examining how different board game mechanics influenced the types of language-focused discussions that emerged.

Other qualitative studies rely on classroom observations and teacher reflections to assess game-based learning experiences. For instance, Chen (2021) conducted an action research study on student-designed board games, collecting teacher reflections and student self-reports to evaluate motivation, engagement, and creativity in language learning. Poole et al. (2019) examined board games using recorded classroom observations and content analysis of recorded gameplay to assess how students used Chinese while engaging in collaborative problem-solving. Though it should be noted that this study falls into a gray area as traditional qualitative approaches were not used. Rather the authors employed natural language processing techniques to extract qualitative themes for the data.

Some studies combine quantitative performance measures with qualitative analyses to provide a more comprehensive analysis of the board game intervention. For example, Fung and Min (2016) studied the impact of *What Say You* on ESL speaking fluency, combining pre- and post-treatment speaking tests with anxiety questionnaires and classroom observations. Analysis showed significant fluency gains, while qualitative feedback indicated increased student confidence in oral communication. Hsu and Liang (2021) examined a board game intervention for English and computational thinking skills, using pre- and post-test data, anxiety surveys, and qualitative observations. Their data showed that while both plugged (digital) and unplugged (physical) versions of the board game improved English vocabulary acquisition, the digital version also enhanced problem-solving skills. Chao and Fan (2020) investigated the role of board games in reducing language anxiety, using pre- and post-treatment FLCAS (Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale) data alongside content analysis of student feedback and teacher reflection notes. Authors found that board games helped alleviate communication anxiety but did not significantly reduce test-related stress.

4.5 Language learning outcomes

Several studies have explored how board games contribute to vocabulary retention and recall. This echoes the research on digital games and is likely associated with the intuitive belief that vocabulary growth is associated with proficiency development. Fotini and Makrina (2017) investigated the use of

board games such as *Chutes and Ladders*, *UNO*, and *Operation* to enhance vocabulary learning among six-year-old Greek learners of English. Their quasi-experimental study revealed significant improvements in vocabulary retention, with students in the board game condition outperforming those in traditional instruction. Similarly, Metom et al. (2019) explored how *Vocathon* promoted vocabulary acquisition among university-level EFL learners. While survey results indicated strong student engagement and perceived usefulness, the study lacked pre-test/post-test assessments to empirically measure vocabulary retention.

Studies have also compared board games with alternative instructional methods for vocabulary learning. Wen et al. (2020) compared an educational board game (*Conveyance GO*) with flashcard-based vocabulary instruction in a Mandarin Chinese beginner-level class. Their findings indicated that while both groups improved, the board game group outperformed the flashcard group in post-test scores. However, the flashcard group reported higher motivation and lower cognitive load, suggesting a trade-off between engagement and learning depth in game-based approaches.

Board games have been widely used to promote oral interaction and fluency. Fung and Min (2016) examined how the board game *What Say You* impacted the speaking abilities of low-proficiency ESL learners in Malaysia. Their quasi-experimental study demonstrated significant improvements in students' fluency and confidence, as measured through pre- and post-treatment speaking tests. Studies incorporating peer interaction and scaffolding further highlight the benefits of board games for communicative competence. Poole et al. (2019) analyzed language use in a Chinese dual-language immersion classroom using the cooperative board game *Mystery Forest*. Their findings showed that students actively negotiated meaning, collaborated on game tasks, and engaged in sustained communication in the target language. Additionally, Luk (2013) examined the role of participation structures in game-based learning and found that students playing board games produced more spontaneous language, while those acting as game facilitators relied on formulaic expressions. These studies underscore the role of board games in fostering interactive and meaningful communication in language learning.

Board games have also been studied for their effectiveness in reinforcing grammatical structures. Paris and Yussof (2013) examined the *Time Trap* board game, which was designed to improve verb tense accuracy among pre-university TESL students in Malaysia. Their quasi-experimental study found that students in the board game condition showed greater improvements in forming and correcting sentences compared to those receiving traditional instruction. Similarly, Konzett (2015) analyzed how a French verb conjugation board game facilitated peer-assessment, showing that students engaged in multimodal negotiation to correct verb tense errors while maintaining game flow.

In addition to linguistic skills, many studies have examined the impact of board games on student motivation, engagement, and anxiety. Chao and Fan (2020) investigated the use of *Halli Galli* and *Alles Tomate* as ice-breaking activities in a fifth-grade EFL classroom in Taiwan. Their study found that while board games slightly reduced communication apprehension, test anxiety and fear of negative evaluation increased, suggesting that board games alone may not alleviate all forms of language learning anxiety. Conversely, Chen (2021) explored the role of board game design and family involvement in increasing motivation and engagement among Taiwanese university students. Findings indicated that student-designed board games fostered creativity and cooperative learning, leading to higher motivation and reduced classroom stress. Similarly, Hsu and Liang (2021) found that a board game integrated with computational thinking exercises lowered foreign language anxiety while improving problem-solving skills, demonstrating the potential for interdisciplinary approaches to game-based language learning.

5. Discussion

This systematic review examined the role of board games in second and foreign language learning, focusing on the types of games used, how they were implemented in classrooms, the linguistic skills targeted, and their overall impact on learning. The studies reviewed demonstrated that board games are a versatile pedagogical tool that promotes authentic language use and is more easily integrated into the classroom environments.

One of the key takeaways from this review is that board games are highly adaptable tools that can be used in both structured and open-ended ways. The research suggests several important considerations for language educators. First, studies that explicitly pre-taught linguistic forms before gameplay (e.g., Paris & Yussof, 2013; Konzett, 2015) focused on language accuracy in contrast to those emphasizing peer interaction and negotiation of meaning (e.g., Poole et al., 2019; Reid, 2024) which focused on fluency and communicative competence. Studies in both explicit and implicit oriented paradigms provide educators with a model for integrating board games into the classroom in a way that aligns with their teaching approach. The effectiveness of board games depends largely on how they are implemented. Research suggests that pre-game instructional support and post-game reflection improve learning outcomes (York, 2020). Without structured support, some students may just play the games without actively using the target language. Incorporating teacher-led debriefing sessions or learner self-assessment activities may enhance metalinguistic awareness.

While competitive board games can increase engagement and motivation, they may disadvantage lower-proficiency learners by fostering anxiety or discouraging participation. Cooperative board games, such as *Mystery Forest* (Poole et al., 2019), provide opportunities for peer scaffolding and collective problem-solving, making them particularly beneficial in mixed-proficiency classrooms. Research on affective factors suggests that board games can help reduce communication apprehension while students are playing the games (Chao & Fan, 2020; Fung & Min, 2016). However, some studies found that test-related anxiety and fear of negative evaluation remained high, indicating that while board games create a low-pressure environment, they should not be viewed as a substitute for broader anxiety-reduction strategies.

Despite the promising findings, some challenges and limitations were noted in the reviewed studies. While many studies reported increased engagement and motivation, not all documented significant linguistic improvement (Mattheoudakis & Panteliou, 2022). The effectiveness of board game interventions often depended on factors such as instructional design, player roles, and the presence of scaffolding. Another limitation is the long-term effect of using board games in the classroom. Most studies in this review assessed short-term learning gains. Future research should examine whether board game-based learning leads to sustained improvements in language proficiency. Further, some studies lacked a control group, making it difficult to determine whether improvements were due to board games or other instructional factors (Metom et al., 2019). More rigorous experimental designs are needed to isolate the specific impact of board games on language learning and specifically on the classroom dynamic.

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Based on the findings of this review, several areas for future research and practice emerge. Most research has focused on vocabulary and speaking skills; reading, writing, and listening-based board games remain underexplored. Additionally, future studies should examine how digital and physical board games compare in promoting engagement, interaction, and language learning outcomes.

6. Conclusion

This systematic review highlights the pedagogical value of board games in second and foreign language learning. Research suggests that when thoughtfully integrated into classroom instruction, board games can enhance motivation, fluency, and communicative competence. However, their effectiveness depends on appropriate scaffolding, structured implementation, and alignment with learning objectives. Future research should continue exploring the optimal balance between structured and incidental learning in ludic language pedagogy. By refining instructional strategies and addressing implementation challenges, educators can leverage the potential of board games to create engaging, interactive, and effective language learning experiences.

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Ludography

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