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CAWANGAN NEGERI SEMBILAN  
KAMPUS SEREMBAN

# Using Social Simulation Games to Foster Confident English Speakers

**NADIAH YAHYA UDDIN**

**UiTM CAWANGAN NEGERI SEMBILAN KAMPUS REMBAU**



Language learning thrives when anxiety is replaced by curiosity, yet the fear of making mistakes in front of peers can be a significant barrier for many English as a Second Language (ESL) students. A growing body of research suggests that social simulation games such as “The Sims” (2000) offer a compelling solution. By stepping into the shoes of a character within a low-stakes, interactive world, learners are motivated to use English creatively. According to Professor Jonathan Reinhardt of the University of Arizona College of Information Science (2024), students reported that they have been learning English continuously while playing The Sims.

Classroom-based studies further demonstrate the practical value of this approach. An exploratory experiment that integrated The Sims 4 into a vocabulary-focused curriculum found that teacher instruction and structured in-class activities effectively fostered vocabulary acquisition, transforming screen time into a productive, goal-oriented learning experience (Wang, 2024). This shift from rote memorization to meaningful, playful interaction directly addresses the affective filter hypothesis, which holds that students learn best in a relaxed environment.

The positive impact on students’ motivation and emotional engagement is also well-documented. A comprehensive review of digital simulation games in language classrooms confirmed that such platforms consistently enhance not only vocabulary knowledge and retention but also a

range of positive affective factors that support learning (Digital simulation games in CALL, 2023). When classrooms combine the immersive pull of a simulation with deliberate instruction, they do more than teach English—they cultivate self-assurance.

Quantitative evidence from a study by Zadylska et al. (2024) further underlines the quantifiable gains that simulation games can yield in communicative competence. They tracked the progress of an experimental group of foreign language students who learned through simulation games, compared with a traditional control group. The results showed that the experimental group not only progressed to a B2 proficiency level (with an average score increase of 1.76 compared to the control group's 0.57) but also demonstrated substantial improvements in interview-based speaking tasks, outperforming the control group by 46% in this area.

Most strikingly, self-reported confidence in communication surged to 81% among the game-based learners, up from 50% in the traditional group, providing a direct statistical link between digital simulation and learner self-assurance.



In parallel, a focus on the psychological dimension of speaking is critical to understanding why these games build confidence. The landmark study “Can I Say Something? The Effects of Digital Game Play on Willingness to Communicate” (Reinders & Wattana, 2014) directly examined learners’ readiness to enter discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2.

30 Thai university students of English as a foreign language participated in six 90-minute sessions playing "Ragnarok Online," a massively multiplayer online role-playing game. Before the gaming sessions, the students reported low confidence, high anxiety, low perceived competence, and low willingness to communicate. After the six-game intervention, the same measures showed a marked and significant improvement: participants felt more confident, less anxious, more competent, and notably more willing to use English in conversation. This shift in disposition is a core prerequisite for authentic language use, demonstrating that social simulation gaming can lower the psychological barriers that often inhibit spoken English.

Looking beyond willingness to the actual mechanics of speech, longitudinal research has traced tangible improvements in the linguistic building blocks of spoken fluency. A mixed-methods case study published by Jabbari & Peterson (2023) measured the speaking performance of six English as a foreign language (EFL) gamers over a six-month period while they played commercial massively multiplayer online games, using English as the main medium of communication. The participants were divided into two groups based on proficiency level: low-intermediate and high-intermediate. Each group collaborated with a native English speaker within the game environment. The findings revealed that the gamers' speaking performance improved in half of the measured indices of complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF). The researchers linked these gains to the socio-affective environment of games, where communication is play-driven and collaborative. This suggests that pressure-free, frequent interactions are key drivers of oral language development. It also provides a clear, longitudinal link between in-game speaking practice and the development of confident, fluent English production.

Ultimately, harnessing the joy of social gaming transforms the language classroom into a safe space for growth, equipping students with the communicative courage to succeed beyond its walls. Educators who choose to incorporate these tools are not merely providing entertainment; they are strategically activating proven mechanisms that reduce anxiety, increase willingness to speak, and improve their students' underlying fluency. As the evidence from these studies collectively suggests, the path to confident English speakers may well be paved with virtual worlds and player-driven communication

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