# Gamification as Pedagogical Innovation: Evaluating the Story Cube Approach to Reduce English-speaking Anxiety

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to design, develop, and evaluate a gamified instructional tool Story Cube to reduce English-speaking anxiety among primary Tamil school students in Malaysia. Using a Design and Development Research (DDR) approach (Richey & Klein, 2013), data were gathered from interviews and focus groups with English teachers and SISC+ officers in Tamil schools. The iterative process involved analysis, design, development, and implementation phases, with thematic analysis conducted to identify key patterns in teachers' and officers' perceptions. Results revealed that students often avoid speaking lessons due to fear, anxiety, and lack of engaging activities. Teachers emphasised the need for tools that are interactive, student-centred, and sustainable. Features such as gamified elements (points, scores, competition) and storytelling components were identified as crucial in reducing speaking anxiety. Teachers highlighted that "Story Cube" can provide a safe, motivating, and non-threatening environment for speaking practice. The findings suggest that gamified interventions can complement existing teaching practices, enhance student motivation, and address the persistent issue of English-speaking anxiety in vernacular schools. This study contributes to the limited body of literature on anxiety reduction in Tamil vernacular schools and introduces a contextually relevant, teacher-informed gamified solution that may be adapted in other multilingual educational settings.

*Keywords:* Design-based research (DBR), educational innovation, English language anxiety, gamification in education, language learning anxiety, speaking skills, story cube intervention, vernacular Tamil schools

## INTRODUCTION

English has long been positioned as a critical subject in the Malaysian education system, taught from preschool through tertiary levels and consistently emphasised in successive national education blueprints and language policies (Mohamed Jamrus, & Razali, 2021). Numerous initiatives spearheaded by the Ministry of Education, alongside contributions from non-governmental organisations and international agencies, have sought to elevate English language proficiency across generations. The prominence of English within Malaysia's linguistic and socio-political landscape is partly a legacy of the colonial era, which positioned the language as a tool of governance, commerce, and upward mobility. Given this historical and policy-driven emphasis, one might expect Malaysian learners to acquire proficiency in English with relative ease. However, empirical evidence continues to reveal a persistent gap between policy aspirations and the actual communicative competence of students, particularly in spoken English.

One of the most critical barriers contributing to this gap is the prevalence of speaking anxiety among Malaysian learners. Even though English is no longer categorised as a foreign language but rather as a second language within the Malaysian context, many students continue to perceive it as difficult to use, especially in oral communication (Pabro-Maquidato, 2021). Speaking anxiety is not only an affective challenge but also a pedagogical barrier that undermines students' willingness to communicate, restricts opportunities for practice, and consequently impedes language development (Shanmugan et al., 2025). This issue is particularly acute in vernacular Tamil schools, where the sociolinguistic environment is dominated by the mother tongue, and cultural factors often reinforce reluctance to engage in English-speaking tasks. Within such contexts, English is frequently perceived as distant, formal, and anxiety-inducing, thereby exacerbating the psychological barriers faced by learners.

Teachers play a pivotal role in mediating these challenges, as they are positioned at the intersection of curriculum mandates and classroom realities. Their ability to design, adapt, and implement effective strategies to alleviate speaking anxiety is crucial for cultivating more supportive and engaging learning environments. However, studies have shown that many teachers in vernacular schools face resource constraints, curricular rigidity, and limited exposure to creative instructional tools, which further inhibit their ability to address speaking-related challenges effectively (M. Ramalingam et al., 2022). This underscores the need for contextually relevant innovations that can both support teachers' pedagogical practices and directly target students' affective barriers to communication.

In response to these enduring challenges, the present study adopts a Design and Development Research (DDR) framework to conceptualise, design, and evaluate an innovative gamified instructional tool, Story Cube, with the primary aim of reducing

English-speaking anxiety among Tamil school students. DDR is particularly suited for this inquiry as it combines systematic design processes with empirical testing in authentic classroom contexts, thereby ensuring both theoretical relevance and practical usability (Richey & Klein, 2013). Specifically, this study pursues three interrelated objectives: (i) to explore English teachers' and SISC+ officers' perceptions of speaking anxiety among Tamil vernacular school students; (ii) to identify the design features of a gamified tool that can motivate, engage, and support learners in overcoming speaking-related anxiety; and (iii) to evaluate the feasibility and perceived impact of implementing Story Cube in real classroom settings.

By addressing these objectives, the study seeks to contribute both to the theoretical discourse on language anxiety and to the practical advancement of instructional innovations that are responsive to the unique needs of vernacular school contexts. In doing so, it aims to bridge the enduring gap between English language policy aspirations and the lived realities of Malaysian classrooms.

## BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Students in Tamil vernacular schools often demonstrate reluctance to speak in English, largely due to fear and anxiety. Pillai et al. (2021) observed that this reluctance is closely tied to the stigma of making mistakes, particularly in pronunciation and word usage, which creates heightened self-consciousness among learners. As second

language learners with Tamil as their mother tongue, these students naturally encounter challenges in acquiring spoken English. However, when anxiety is layered on top of linguistic difficulty, teachers face even greater challenges in fostering effective oral communication (Kumaran & Krish, 2021). In many cases, this anxiety has been directly linked to mother tongue interference, which shapes how students perceive and produce English in classroom contexts.

The issue of first language dominance is not unique to Malaysia. In a study with undergraduates, found that language interference continues to influence learners' oral performance across contexts. Early linguistic theories also reinforce this perspective: Chomsky's view of the first language as a naturally dominant structure suggests that its influence inevitably shapes subsequent language learning (Siregar, 2021). Addressing such interference requires reducing fear rather than simply increasing exposure. Siregar (2021) argued that non-formal, student-centred activities can lower speaking anxiety more effectively than rigid classroom practices.

In Malaysia, this understanding is reflected in the Highly Immersive Programme (HIP) under the Memartabatkan Bahasa Malaysia dan Mengukuhkan Bahasa Inggeris (MBMMBI) policy. HIP seeks to reduce learners' anxiety by creating engaging, supportive environments where English is used meaningfully (Zainal et al., 2024). Nevertheless, despite these national initiatives, Tamil vernacular school students remain underrepresented in intervention-

based research. This underscores the need for innovative, contextually relevant tools such as gamified approaches that directly address their anxiety and foster confidence in speaking English.

**Schema Theory by Jean Piaget (1952)**

The Schema Theory by Piaget (1952) is a foundational construct in cognitive psychology, as it explains how learners organise, interpret, and process new information through pre-existing mental structures. Schema-based perspectives on cognitive development are essential for understanding how meaningful learning occurs in classroom settings. A crucial aspect involves the role of teachers in creating experiences that stimulate schema activation, thereby enabling learners to connect prior knowledge with new input. Within the context of English language learning, this process is particularly salient, as students rely extensively on stimuli and scaffolding provided by teachers. When such stimuli are appropriately structured, they can foster positive and enduring learning outcomes. Fang (2023) further underscores that positive experiences enhance long-term retention of communicative skills, particularly in speaking. The schema theory is closely related to the present study, as Story Cube is intentionally designed to stimulate schema activation by encouraging learners to construct ideas incrementally. By piecing together small components into coherent narratives, students are empowered to engage in process-oriented thinking, thereby reducing anxiety and facilitating

spontaneous oral communication. This structured yet flexible design supports the transition from passive knowledge reception to active language production, which is crucial for second language acquisition.

**Anxiety in English Language Speaking**

An article written by K. Ramalingam et al. (2022) is the latest account that elaborates on the specific challenges faced by teachers in Tamil schools in Malaysia when teaching speaking skills. Although the article concerns teaching Tamil speaking skills, it addresses themes relevant to the teaching of speaking skills. K. Ramalingam et al. (2022) found that one of the major reasons that prevent the effective teaching of speaking skills of speaking skills is the teachers' incapabilities to create relevant teaching materials and tools. A study by Tran (2022) with 150 non-native college students in Vietnam uncovered several factors that caused anxiety among the respondents when speaking in English. Among the results were embarrassment caused by mistakes when speaking in English, bullying by classmates when speaking in English, lack of speaking activities in the classroom, and lack of support from the teachers for English speaking.

Another study conducted by Hu et al. (2024) where 631 primary school students in a province in China took part in the foreign language anxiety scale survey. Hu et al. (2024) found that the anxiety level of the students was inversely correlated with the foreign language achievements. Another study by Sosas (2021) with

foreign language learners at a university in Indonesia also reported similar findings. Sosas (2021), however, also suggested an intervention where an application was developed to help students lower their language anxiety. Collectively, these studies affirm that speaking anxiety transcends national contexts, affecting learners across educational levels and cultural settings. However, they also suggest that targeted interventions, particularly innovative tools can mitigate these barriers.

## Role of Gamification

The Story Cube is a form of game and hence, gamification is related. Theoretically, the concept of gamification is related to the mechanics of gamification, which are in-built elements within a game that make the concept of gamification. In a study by Yaccob et al. (2022), game elements include storyline of the game, roles played by the players, the goals and objectives, and rewards. These elements complete the gamification concept and make the concept rooted to the very core of constructivism where pupil-centred learning is emphasised (Yaccob et al., 2022). Arip and Hashim (2024) stated that constructivism can be considered as the core theory in understanding gamification in the classroom because of its principles such as the pupil-centred strategies, communication and collaboration among pupils, interactions and the idea of learning through meaningful interactions.

According to a study by Kıyançiçek and Uzun (2022), gamification has become a common thing in the English language classroom. The introduction of applications like "Kahoot!" has taken the concept of gamification to a whole new level. Kıyançiçek and Uzun (2022) conducted a review and found that the application provides numerous benefits for English language teachers, especially in terms of encouraging second language learners to use the language more proactively. In relation to that, it is also very important to note that gamification in the classroom aid in enhancing students' motivation levels. A study by Jiménez-Sánchez and Gargallo-Camarillas (2020) explored the use of gamification to increase students' motivation when learning English. The experimental study by Jiménez-Sánchez and Gargallo-Camarillas (2020) exposed how the use of games affected the motivation levels of students in the experimental group compared to the control group. The results were significant in understanding the impact of games in the classrooms globally.

The Malaysian context reflects similar benefits. Perumal and Subramaniam (2020) demonstrated that an innovation kit grounded in gamification principles improved Tamil vernacular school students' attention and performance in English. Such findings illustrate that gamification can be tailored to address local needs while aligning with global best practices. Importantly, gamified activities such as Story Cube extend beyond entertainment; they create safe, competitive, and engaging learning environments where learners can practice speaking without fear of judgement. As reported by Kohnke and

Moorhouse (2022), modern-day games for language learning in the classroom are more generic compared to more contextual innovations like the Story Cube and other innovations created by language teachers based on specific needs of the students. This is an advantage of the Story Cube innovation.

Together, the reviewed literature highlights three critical insights: (i) Schema Theory underscores the importance of structured cognitive scaffolding in speaking tasks, (ii) speaking anxiety remains a universal challenge among second language learners, and (iii) gamification offers a powerful means of reducing anxiety while enhancing motivation. Despite this, few studies have examined gamified tools specifically designed for Tamil vernacular schools in Malaysia, leaving a significant gap in addressing the cultural and linguistic realities of these learners. This study responds to that gap by designing and testing Story Cube, a gamified intervention that draws on both theoretical and practical insights to reduce speaking anxiety and promote learner confidence.

## NOVELTY OF THE STUDY

The novelty of this study lies in its contribution at the levels of students, teachers, and the broader educational ecosystem. At the learner level, the development and evaluation of Story Cube as a gamified instructional tool offer a fresh pedagogical approach to addressing one of the most persistent challenges in second language acquisition, particularly speaking anxiety. While research on language anxiety has been extensive, few studies have translated theoretical insights into practical classroom tools specifically designed for the Malaysian vernacular school context. By providing learners with an engaging and low-stakes environment in which to practise speaking, Story Cube has the potential to reduce affective barriers and foster greater confidence. This innovation empowers students to view English not as a subject of fear but as a medium of enjoyment and expression, thus supporting more sustainable language acquisition. Importantly, its utility is not limited to Tamil vernacular schools, as the tool is adaptable and scalable across Malaysia.

At the teacher level, this study underscores the importance of pedagogical creativity and responsiveness in addressing classroom challenges. The introduction of Story Cube highlights how teachers can transcend reliance on traditional, textbook-driven practices by adopting innovative methods tailored to learner needs. Beyond the immediate use of the tool, the study is expected to inspire teachers to adopt a more research-informed orientation, whereby classroom challenges are systematically observed, analysed, and addressed through evidence-based instructional innovations. In this regard, Story Cube functions not only as a teaching aid but also as a catalyst for cultivating teachers' design thinking and problem-solving skills. Such an orientation resonates with the 21st century pedagogical expectations, where adaptability, innovation, and learner-centredness are increasingly recognised as core teacher competencies.

At the institutional and systemic levels, the findings of this study offer significant implications for educational leadership and policy. The integration of Story Cube into classroom practice exemplifies the potential of grassroots innovations to inform systemic educational improvement. It signals to the Ministry of Education, state departments, and district education offices the importance of fostering a culture of innovation among teachers. This can be achieved by institutionalising support structures such as workshops, professional learning communities, and innovation-sharing platforms, where teachers are both empowered and incentivised to design context-specific solutions. In doing so, the study aligns with broader national aspirations of cultivating creative and critical thinkers, not only among learners but also among educators.

Furthermore, the novelty of this research lies in its methodological positioning. By employing a Design and Development Research (DDR) framework, the study bridges the often-observed gap between theoretical research and practical application. The DDR's iterative nature ensures that the intervention is grounded in real classroom needs, co-designed with practitioners, and refined through systematic feedback loops. This methodological rigour elevates Story Cube beyond being a mere instructional tool, positioning it instead as an empirically validated innovation with both pedagogical and scholarly significance.

In sum, the study advances the discourse on English language teaching by offering a concrete, contextually relevant, and empirically tested innovation. Its novelty lies not only in addressing a pervasive problem English-speaking anxiety but also in demonstrating how design-based approaches can generate scalable solutions with direct relevance to policy, practice, and theory. Through this, the study makes a timely and meaningful contribution to the Malaysian education landscape, while offering insights that may resonate with other multilingual contexts globally.

## METHODS

This study adopted a Design and Development Research (DDR) methodology as outlined by Richey and Klein (2013), a framework that is widely recognised for its applicability in the systematic creation, refinement, and evaluation of instructional interventions. The DDR is inherently iterative, encompassing sequential yet overlapping phases of analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation. Such a methodological orientation is particularly germane to this study, which sought to conceptualise and assess a gamified instructional tool Story Cube to mitigate English-speaking anxiety among primary school learners. By integrating iterative refinement with empirical validation, the DDR provides a robust mechanism for addressing both theoretical and practical concerns in instructional innovation.

The participant group consisted of 10 English language teachers drawn from Tamil vernacular primary schools and 5

School Improvement Specialist Coaches Plus (SISC+) officers affiliated with the district education office. A purposive sampling strategy was employed, premised on the rationale that practitioners with direct pedagogical responsibilities and supervisory expertise would yield nuanced insights into the phenomena under investigation. This deliberate selection ensured that the data reflected both classroom-level challenges and broader systemic considerations in English language pedagogy.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, allowing for both depth and breadth in the exploration of participant experiences. The interview protocol was designed to elicit participants' perspectives on the prevalence and manifestations of students' English-speaking anxiety, their experiences with existing intervention tools, and their expectations regarding the feasibility and pedagogical affordances of a gamified solution. Sessions were audio-recorded in their entirety and subsequently transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity of participant narratives.

Thematic analysis served as the primary analytic technique, enabling the categorisation and synthesis of data into coherent thematic patterns. Coding was conducted both inductively, to allow unanticipated themes to emerge, and deductively, based on the study's research objectives. Particular attention was paid to three overarching dimensions: (i) teachers' and officers' perceptions of student anxiety in English speaking; (ii) essential features and characteristics of effective pedagogical interventions; and (iii) the practical and pedagogical feasibility of integrating Story Cube into classroom contexts. To ensure analytical rigour, triangulation was achieved by juxtaposing the perspectives of teachers with those of SISC+ officers, thereby enhancing the comprehensiveness of the findings. Member checking was further conducted to validate the accuracy and credibility of the interpretations.

Ethical considerations were meticulously observed in accordance with established guidelines for educational research. Participants were fully informed of the purpose and scope of the study, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection. Confidentiality was assured through anonymisation of data, and participation remained entirely voluntary, with the right to withdraw at any stage without prejudice.

Figure 1 provides a schematic overview of the DDR phases undertaken in this study, illustrating the iterative progression from needs analysis to the design and evaluation of the intervention tool. This structured yet flexible approach enabled the study to balance methodological rigor with practical relevance, thereby aligning with the dual aims of the DDR: the advancement of theory and the production of usable, context-sensitive educational solutions.

**RESULTS**

The thematic analysis of the interview and focus group transcripts revealed several salient findings related to the development,
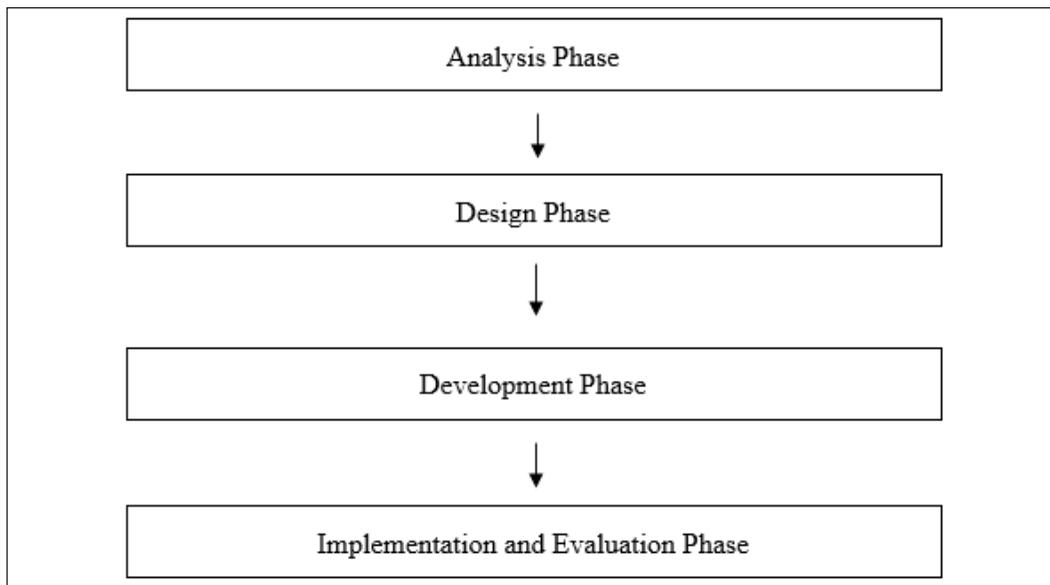
*Figure 1*. DDR Model
*Source*: Richey & Klein (2013)

design, and potential implementation of the Story Cube intervention. These findings are presented according to the emergent themes, supported by both teacher and officer perspectives.

## Theme 1: Student Avoidance and Fear of Speaking

Across participants, there was a consistent observation that students frequently demonstrate avoidance behaviours during English-speaking activities. Teachers described learners as "afraid," "anxious," and often "bored" during oral tasks. This avoidance was linked not only to a lack of engaging classroom activities but also to negative prior experiences that have reinforced fear and reluctance toward English speaking (Shanmugan et al., 2025). Consistent with Tran (2020), manifestations

of embarrassment, heightened peer pressure, and unequal speaking opportunities were identified as aggravating factors, thereby creating persistent barriers to student participation. Importantly, the findings suggest that English-speaking anxiety is not an isolated or episodic issue but rather a continuous behavioural and emotional pattern. This persistent anxiety directly constrains students' willingness to communicate, highlighting the urgent need for structured interventions such as Story Cube that reduce affective barriers while promoting sustained engagement.

## Theme 2: Teacher Practices, Challenges, and Resource Gaps

Teachers articulated significant challenges in addressing speaking skills, primarily due to curriculum rigidity, limited instructional

time, and the scarcity of creative teaching resources. Although multimedia tools such as videos, games, and project-based learning were acknowledged as potentially useful, participants expressed reservations regarding their efficacy in reducing anxiety. Concerns centred on uncertainty about alignment with curricular goals and the practical challenges of classroom management. SISC+ officers echoed these concerns, emphasising the predominance of "too much teacher control," reliance on "traditional approaches," and a general "lack of creativity" in teaching practices. These findings corroborate M. Ramalingam et al. (2022), who reported that teachers in Tamil vernacular schools often struggle with material design and innovation due to resource constraints. The results therefore highlight a systemic gap between pedagogical aspirations for communicative language teaching and the practical realities of classroom implementation.

## Theme 3: Desired Features of Gamified Interventions

Gamification emerged as a central consideration among both teachers and officers. Participants consistently highlighted the motivational potential of gamified elements, particularly competitiveness, collaboration, and interactivity, to engage students more meaningfully in English-speaking tasks. Storytelling activities, when designed to be interactive, were viewed as especially valuable in reducing anxiety and encouraging expression. Furthermore, several teachers advocated for kinaesthetic and tactile features in instructional

resources, arguing that physical, hands-on activities can further stimulate participation. Officers, however, stressed the importance of designing resources that are "self-usable" and "self-sustainable," underscoring the need for practical scalability. These insights align with Jiménez-Sánchez and Gargallo-Camarillas (2020), who demonstrated that gamification, when anchored in usability and interactivity, significantly enhances learner motivation. Conceptually, this resonates with schema theory, as Story Cube enables learners to activate prior knowledge, organise ideas, and construct meaning through gameplay, thereby supporting cognitive processes essential for language acquisition.

## Theme 4: Implementation Feasibility and Perceived Impact

The initial classroom implementation of Story Cube generated encouraging responses. Students reportedly exhibited heightened levels of excitement and enthusiasm, frequently describing the tool as "fun," "interesting," and "engaging." Nevertheless, anxiety was not eliminated, with some students continuing to display hesitation, particularly during the initial introduction of the tool. Teachers unanimously agreed that long-term, consistent integration of Story Cube would be necessary to observe sustained improvements in confidence and communicative competence. At the same time, SISC+ officers emphasised the importance of ensuring alignment with curriculum standards and instructional objectives, cautioning against ad hoc

usage. These perspectives resonate with the findings of Hu et al. (2024), who argued that interventions to address language anxiety must be progressive and consistently embedded in teaching practice to yield meaningful impact.

Overall, the results underscore that while Story Cube demonstrates strong potential as an engaging and anxiety-reducing tool, its effectiveness depends on iterative refinement, curricular integration, and sustained use over time. When compared to other applications like the Story App as studied by Cahyani (2023), the Story Cube has the advantage of giving students the freedom to customise the stories. Cahyani (2023) agreed that applications which give students the ability to build on their creativity are better than applications which provide prepared contents. The tool was thus received as a promising innovation, but one that requires further adaptation and empirical validation before full-scale adoption across diverse school contexts.

## Future Recommendations

The results reported in this study have several indications for future research and development. Most importantly, the although the Story Cube projects positive results, it must be subjected to refinement in line with the comments from the participants. Improvements must focus on increasing interactivity, sustainability and user independence so that the tool can be effectively integrated into diverse classroom contexts.

Next, in the future, studies must consist of a larger sample group. The sample must represent different regions, school types and socioeconomic backgrounds. This is to strengthen the data obtained so that it can be generalised further. Experimental or mixed-method approaches should be implemented to complement qualitative insights, providing more robust evidence of the tool's impact on speaking anxiety.

Finally, gamification in education is a growing trend with increasing demand. Future work on the Story Cube should focus on enhancing the competitive elements of the game as well as its incorporation into the digital as well as the physical world. Future research must evaluate the potential of the Story Cube as a fully digitalised game that could be used by any student from any part of the world at any time of the day. This will make the Story Cube a tool that is truly revolutionary and connect global learners in one platform.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, the study explored the design processes and the development of Story Cube as a tool that could help English language teachers in managing the English-speaking anxiety among students in Tamil vernacular schools in Malaysia. The reports showed that gamification is increasingly popular among teachers in Malaysia. The elements of it such as competitiveness and collaboration made the concept more appealing. The use of the Story Cube with the students showed that their speaking

anxiety can be overcome gradually when they are given the opportunity to use the language in a fun and meaningful way.

Consequently, the study does contribute to the larger field of study. It promotes the need to understand innovative, context-sensitive solutions to long-standing challenges in second language learning. It reinforces the view that addressing speaking anxiety requires more than traditional pedagogy; it calls for creative approaches that reframe speaking as an enjoyable and achievable skill.

The study also provides invaluable input for teachers that teach English. It shows how teachers should develop a tool that can effectively help students in reducing their anxiety when having to speak in the English language. Since teachers can also eventually become researchers, it shows them the iterative nature of design and development research, were continuous cycles of testing and refinement lead to more effective outcomes. Policymakers can also use the input to support innovation and create more room for professional development among teachers.

Finally, the Story Cube has proven that when a tool is designed with the right intention and process, it can achieve its goal which is to reduce English-speaking anxiety. Although it has its flaws, the Story Cube is a tool that can continuously evolve based on the students' needs and the teachers' goals. Beyond the tool itself, the Story Cube inspires teachers to become researchers and game developers who take part directly in solving the problems faced by their students.

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