

GAMIFICATION IN ESL/EFL TEACHING: CONCEPTUAL VIEWS, BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

Gamification has emerged as an innovative pedagogical approach in English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, integrating game design elements to enhance learner engagement, motivation, and language retention. This article is discussed about gamification in teaching.

Keywords; Gamification, education, student, teaching, SLA, learner, feedback.

Introduction

Gamification in education is a concept that involves the use of game elements such as points, badges, levels, and storylines in an educational context that is not a game in order to increase student engagement, attract active participation, and support the achievement of main educational goals. This method is the combination of video, game mechanics and learning activities, thus making the learning environment more interactive, motivating, and effective. Gamification which is based on behavioural psychology and has been further developed with the help of educational technology has gone beyond the traditional games and has become a means of using digital games and game-based learning to deliver education at any level, primary or higher education. Gamified systems that have reward elements, real-time feedback, and game mechanics incorporated in their design, are a great way to motivate students and keep them engaged all through their learning journey. Instead of just simply receiving information, gamified learning motivates the students to take control of their learning by giving them power-ups for participation, opening up badges for them, and taking on gamified tasks that would develop their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Gamification can be implemented by educators to create personal, immersive, and data-driven learning opportunities through online courses, mobile apps, or e-learning platforms. Teachers can set up a highly engaging classroom where students can work on their

own pace through a series of challenges, learn difficult concepts by means of educational games, and get continuously motivated to win by simply aligning gamification elements with clear goals and using carefully thought-out game design elements.

In all, scientific evidence suggests that those techniques developmentally influence motivation, involvement, vocabulary enhancement, and communicative competence. Nevertheless, there are still problems with design, funding, availability, and memory retention in the long run.

The concept of integrating gameful elements into language teaching to enhance engagement and motivation is well established in practice (Reinhardt, 2019; Zhao, 2023).

Gamification has been a revolutionary approach in English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning. It is based on game mechanics that are used for increasing engagement, boosting the motivation, and improving the retention. Researchers from the scientific community focused on the theoretical background of gamification by analyzing the core concepts of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Flow Theory, Behaviorism, and Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories and showed how these conceptual frameworks enhance language learning (Laksanasut S. 2025). Datas showed that gamification is effective in improving vocabulary retention, grammatical accuracy as well as communicative fluency. The reason is it gives students the opportunity to get interactive, reward-based learning experiences. Gamified platforms used for the analysis of pedagogical performances in gamified ESL/EFL teaching have been identified as a best practice endorsed by teachers and educators.

The most common theoretical frame for gamification in SLA is the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which claims that intrinsic motivation increases when learners have the feeling of volition, they master the task, and they experience closeness to others. Self-determination theory (SDT) postulates that the knowledge of human motivation should include an account of innate psychological needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness. (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Research also highlights affective benefits. Learners report decreased anxiety and increased enjoyment when engaging in gamified activities, suggesting that these approaches may enhance learners' emotional connection to language learning.

S.Laksanasut (2025) emphasizes that while gamification can improve vocabulary retention and fluency, overreliance on extrinsic rewards may undermine deep learning if game elements are not carefully designed to align with pedagogical objectives. Salama and Cerón (2025) further suggest that gamification should focus on meaningful language use rather than superficial achievement markers, ensuring learners develop communicative competence alongside motivation.

So, we should revise, gamification has its advantages and disadvantages. Firstly pros of gamification, gamification in education turns online learning into an exciting and highly effective domain where students can really succeed. When we bring parts of video game design into the process of education, we create an informal, energetic, and effective learning atmosphere. It not only makes students feel more involved but also notably improves the durability of the learned information. Students that are highly motivated by their learning experience tend to acquire and absorb new knowledge, which becomes more accessible to them as the learning experience deepens and intensifies. In this way, material, skills, and abilities become much easier to master.

Gamification in education completely changes how feedback, and acknowledgment is delivered, giving learners instant information on their progress and feats. Studies in education demonstrate that giving feedback not soon enough impairs reinforcement learning by lowering the degree of the positive reaction to rewards as compared with the situations where feedback is immediate.

Such a timely feedback system is similar to how games function where players are always assessing their results and changing their strategies accordingly. Learners in an institution see right away the outcome of their work, decide the areas in which they need to make improvements, and at the same time, get emotionally uplifted by their achievements. This kind of instant acknowledgment might inspire learners to keep on improving and get a better grasp of the material through motivation. Therefore, training that uses these kinds of game-like feedback loops is more adaptable and emotionally rewarding. Gamification in education is a great way to make the students actually "touch" the concepts they have learned from their theoretical studies. By embedding real-life experiences in gamified educational materials, students can effectively understand how their choices influence the outcomes and can discover the consequences or benefits of their actions on their own. Such an engaging learning experience not only strengthens their knowledge

of the subject but also makes it clear that the knowledge is useful and practical. The students will be better empowered to understand the real-world value of learning through this method and will be well-equipped for both the opportunities and challenges of the future.

At the same time, gamification in education brings competition along, yet there is a possibility of cooperation being overshadowed. If competition elements are overemphasized, it can result in learners feeling pressured, stressed, or anxious due to the fact that they might perceive others as being ahead of them. Therefore, it's important to have a good balance of competitive game elements and collaborative, supportive learning experiences so that all learners have an equal opportunity to benefit and the culture of learning is what prevails rather than the culture of winning. The method nurtures a good competitive spirit that goes hand in hand with learning and personal development without any compromise.

Gamification in education may also lead to a decrease in intrinsic motivation if the creators of the program put too much focus on external rewards such as badges and points. As a result of overly focusing on game mechanics, the students may simply shrink and hardly feel the old love of learning; instead, their count will be merely on obtaining the points. This should be tantamount to the interior motivation and learning, and the game rewards are just a natural, non-contradictory accompaniment of the genuine curiosity and desire to acquire knowledge.

The introduction of gamification in education is not without difficulties, it is a complex and multifaceted issue that involves the interplay of various factors: planning, resources, and the support system in place for teacher training. Teachers need to deal with the challenge of effectively merging the various game elements with the educational material in such a way that the latter is not overshadowed. This juggling act requires a thorough knowledge of pedagogy, gamification principles as well as a continuous support system that ensures the gamification methods employed are not only engaging but also educationally effective.

Next, gamification has got some disadvantages. Some students may not have the same privilege of accessing electronic devices at home required for gamified learning that other students do, so the educational gap may be further widened between those who have access to technology and those who don't. It is essential to provide equal access to the benefits of gamification in education, which means

that efforts should be made to get around different students' environments and technological realities of the different schools and classrooms.

The problem of turning the most complex subjects into rather simple ones is among the main cons of gamification in education. The danger of content being watered down to fit gamified activities is always there when attention is deeply focused on the different elements of the game. Such simplification might cause the students' knowledge to be very shallow and they may not even realize that they missed critical opportunities for analytical and reflective learning. A teacher is the one who needs to hold the balance that gamification, while it makes learning fun, does not destroy the nature of learning by which the educational material is deep and complex. In fact, if gamified experiences are carefully designed, they can deepen the students' understanding of the subject while using the educational benefits of gamification in preserving the content's depth is a worthy goal.

Teachers can use a wide range of methods and tools to gamify the learning that covers game-based learning gamification. Examples include educational games, digital scavenger hunt, or serious games that replicate real-life decision-making process.

Adding multiple-choice quizzes, in-class exercises, and gamified tasks where students are solving problems or are finding the correct answers, can also help grab their attention even more. If teachers apply digital platforms or software that awarding points, badges or keep track of students' progress, not only can they deliver very fast feedback, but also they will be organizing a far more exciting teaching process.

So, the use of such instruments also facilitates the student to move through the lessons at their own rhythm. It also allows students more chances to learn and gives a teacher more ways to support the student in acquiring new words and phrases particularly when the learning is taking place through the Internet or in e-learning modules. The effect is a more student-centered and interactive approach to learning where the students feel that they are in a game rather than just attending lectures and working towards goals.

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