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INTEGRATING GAMIFICATION TECHNIQUES INTO LANGUAGE TEACHING TO ENHANCE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract

This article examines the integration of gamification techniques into language teaching as a means of enhancing student engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes. Gamification, defined as the application of game-design elements and game principles in non-game contexts, has emerged as a powerful pedagogical strategy in foreign language education. The study explores the theoretical foundations of gamification, including self-determination theory and flow theory, and analyzes practical implementations of game elements such as points, badges, leaderboards, narratives, quests, and rewards in English language classrooms. The article also discusses the role of digital platforms (Kahoot, Quizlet, Duolingo, Classcraft) and considers both the benefits and challenges of gamified instruction. Findings indicate that well-designed gamification significantly increases learner motivation, classroom participation, vocabulary retention, and willingness to communicate in the target language. The article concludes with practical recommendations for English teachers seeking to implement gamification meaningfully and sustainably in their classrooms.

Keywords: Gamification, language teaching, student engagement, motivation, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), game-based learning, educational technology, digital tools, self-determination theory, learner autonomy.



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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, language education has undergone a significant transformation driven by technological advancement, changing learner profiles, and a growing understanding of the cognitive and emotional dimensions of learning. Traditional approaches, which often relied on rote memorization, teacher-centered instruction, and repetitive drilling, are increasingly being supplemented or replaced by more interactive, learner-centered methodologies. Among these innovative approaches, gamification has emerged as a particularly promising strategy for enhancing student engagement in foreign language classrooms.

Gamification refers to the application of game-design elements and principles in non-game contexts to motivate participation, engagement, and learning. In educational settings, this means incorporating features such as points, badges, levels, leaderboards, challenges, narratives, and rewards into the learning process. The fundamental premise of gamification is that the same psychological mechanisms that make games compelling — clear goals, immediate feedback, sense of progress, and intrinsic enjoyment — can be harnessed to make learning more attractive and effective.

Student engagement has long been recognized as one of the most important predictors of academic success, particularly in language learning, where consistent practice and active use of the target language are essential. However, maintaining engagement is a persistent challenge, especially in the age of digital distraction and shortened attention spans. Many learners, particularly young adults and adolescents, find traditional language classes monotonous or stressful, which leads to decreased motivation, anxiety, and ultimately, poor learning outcomes. Gamification offers a way to address these issues by transforming the learning experience into something more enjoyable, interactive, and rewarding.



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This article aims to examine the theoretical foundations of gamification in language education, analyze its practical applications in English language teaching, and discuss the benefits and challenges associated with its implementation. The article also provides concrete examples of gamified activities and digital tools that English teachers can use to enhance student engagement in their classrooms.

1. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF GAMIFICATION

The concept of gamification, although popularized in the early 2010s, draws upon a rich tradition of educational theories that emphasize the importance of motivation, engagement, and active learning. Several theoretical frameworks provide the foundation for understanding why gamification works and how it can be effectively applied in language teaching.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Deci and Ryan, is one of the most relevant frameworks for understanding the motivational power of gamification. According to SDT, human motivation is driven by three innate psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When these needs are satisfied, individuals experience intrinsic motivation, which is more sustainable and effective than extrinsic motivation. Gamification supports all three needs: it offers learners choices (autonomy), provides clear goals and feedback that allow them to develop and demonstrate skills (competence), and often involves collaboration or competition with others (relatedness).

Flow Theory, proposed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, describes the optimal state of engagement in which individuals are fully immersed in an activity, experiencing deep concentration, enjoyment, and a loss of self-consciousness. Flow occurs when the challenge of an activity is well-matched to the individual's skill level. Gamified learning environments can be designed to maintain this



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balance through adaptive difficulty, progressive challenges, and immediate feedback, thereby promoting flow states that enhance learning.

Behaviorist theories also contribute to understanding gamification, particularly through the concepts of operant conditioning and positive reinforcement. Points, badges, and rewards serve as reinforcers that encourage desired behaviors such as completing assignments, participating in discussions, or practicing vocabulary. While behaviorist approaches alone are insufficient for deep learning, when combined with cognitive and social elements, they can effectively shape learning habits.

Constructivist theories, particularly those of Vygotsky and Bruner, emphasize the social and active nature of learning. Many gamified activities involve collaboration, problem-solving, and meaningful engagement with content, all of which align with constructivist principles. Gamification can create rich learning environments where students construct knowledge through interaction with peers and the language itself.

2. KEY ELEMENTS OF GAMIFICATION IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Effective gamification involves the thoughtful integration of various game-design elements into the learning experience. Understanding these elements and how they function is crucial for teachers who wish to implement gamification successfully. The most commonly used elements include the following:

Points and Experience (XP). Points serve as quantifiable indicators of progress and achievement. In a language classroom, students can earn points for completing exercises, participating in discussions, correctly using new vocabulary, or helping classmates. Points provide immediate feedback and a sense of accomplishment.



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Badges and Achievements. Badges are visual representations of specific accomplishments, such as mastering a grammar topic, completing a reading challenge, or maintaining a learning streak. They serve as collectible recognition that motivates learners to pursue specific goals and demonstrate proficiency in various skill areas.

Levels and Progression. Levels create a sense of structured advancement, allowing learners to track their growth over time. As students accumulate points or complete tasks, they advance to higher levels, which can unlock new content, privileges, or challenges. This progression mirrors language proficiency development from beginner to advanced stages.

Leaderboards. Leaderboards display rankings of students based on their performance or accumulated points. They tap into healthy competition and can motivate students to strive for higher achievement. However, leaderboards must be used carefully to avoid discouraging lower-performing students; team-based leaderboards or individual progress trackers are often more inclusive.

Quests and Missions. Quests are structured tasks or sequences of tasks that students must complete to achieve a larger goal. In language learning, a quest might involve gathering vocabulary, conducting an interview, writing a story, and presenting findings. Quests provide narrative context and meaningful objectives.

Narratives and Storytelling. A compelling narrative or storyline can transform a series of activities into an immersive learning experience. For example, students might become detectives solving a mystery in English, requiring them to read clues, interview suspects, and write reports. Narratives provide motivation and context for language use.

Rewards and Power-Ups. Tangible or intangible rewards — such as extra credit, homework passes, virtual items, or special privileges — reinforce positive



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behaviors. Power-ups, such as the ability to skip a difficult question or receive a hint, add strategic elements to the learning process.

Feedback and Progress Indicators. Immediate, frequent, and meaningful feedback is essential for gamification. Progress bars, completion percentages, and personalized feedback help students understand where they stand and what they need to do to improve.

It is important to note that successful gamification is not merely about adding points and badges to existing activities. Rather, it requires a holistic redesign of the learning experience to incorporate game mechanics in ways that genuinely enhance motivation and engagement. Poorly designed gamification, which relies excessively on extrinsic rewards without meaningful learning, can actually undermine intrinsic motivation in the long term.

3. DIGITAL TOOLS AND PLATFORMS FOR GAMIFIED LANGUAGE LEARNING

The proliferation of educational technology has made it easier than ever for language teachers to incorporate gamification into their classrooms. Numerous digital platforms and tools have been developed specifically with gamified elements, offering ready-made solutions that teachers can adapt to their specific contexts. Below are some of the most widely used platforms:

Kahoot! is a popular game-based learning platform that allows teachers to create interactive quizzes, polls, and surveys. Students join games using a code on their devices and answer questions in real-time, competing for the highest score. Kahoot! is particularly effective for vocabulary review, grammar checks, and listening comprehension exercises. Its energetic music, time pressure, and live leaderboard create excitement and engagement.



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Quizlet offers digital flashcards, study sets, and games for vocabulary learning. Features such as Quizlet Live and Match transform vocabulary practice into competitive or collaborative games. Students can also create their own study sets, which fosters autonomy and ownership of their learning.

Duolingo is one of the most well-known gamified language-learning applications, used by millions of learners worldwide. It incorporates points (XP), streaks, leagues, levels, and a virtual currency system to motivate continuous practice. While Duolingo is typically used for self-study, teachers can integrate it into classroom routines and use Duolingo for Schools to monitor student progress.

Classcraft is a comprehensive classroom management and gamification platform that turns the entire class into a role-playing game. Students choose characters, earn experience points, gain powers, and collaborate in teams. Teachers can reward positive behavior, manage learning quests, and integrate curriculum content into the game world.

Genially and Wordwall provide tools for creating interactive learning materials such as escape rooms, board games, word searches, and matching games. These platforms allow teachers to design custom gamified activities that align with their specific learning objectives.

Minecraft Education Edition offers immersive 3D environments where students can explore, build, and collaborate. Language teachers have used Minecraft to create scenarios that require students to communicate in English to solve problems, navigate environments, and complete missions.

In addition to these specialized platforms, many learning management systems (such as Moodle, Google Classroom, and Edmodo) now include gamification features such as badges and points. Teachers can also create low-tech gamified activities using physical materials such as board games, card games, and role-



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play scenarios. The choice of tool should be guided by learning objectives, student needs, and available resources rather than by technology for its own sake.

4.PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

Gamification can be applied to virtually every aspect of English language teaching, from vocabulary and grammar to speaking, listening, reading, and writing. The following examples illustrate how teachers can integrate game elements into different language skills and classroom activities.

Vocabulary Building. One of the most common applications of gamification is in vocabulary instruction. Teachers can organize vocabulary scavenger hunts in which students must find words around the school or in texts that match specific categories. Vocabulary challenges, in which students earn points for using new words correctly in conversation or writing, encourage active use rather than passive recognition. Digital flashcard games on platforms like Quizlet make memorization more enjoyable and effective.

Grammar Practice. Grammar is often considered the most tedious aspect of language learning, but gamification can make it engaging. Teachers can design grammar quests in which students must correct sentences, transform structures, or build complex sentences to advance through levels. Kahoot! quizzes on tenses, conditionals, or modal verbs can turn review sessions into exciting competitions. Sentence-building card games encourage creative and strategic thinking about grammar.

Speaking and Communication. Encouraging students to speak in English is one of the greatest challenges for many teachers. Gamification can reduce speaking anxiety by creating playful, low-stakes contexts. Role-playing games, where students take on different characters and complete missions through dialogue, are



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highly effective. Speaking challenges, such as describing an object using as many adjectives as possible or telling a story without using certain common words, add a fun, competitive element. Debates can be gamified with point systems for using specific argumentative phrases or grammatical structures.

Reading Comprehension. Reading can be transformed into a treasure hunt or mystery investigation, in which students must find clues in texts, decipher codes, or piece together information from different passages. Reading challenges, such as reading a certain number of pages or books per month to earn badges, encourage extensive reading. Book clubs with gamified discussion roles (questioner, summarizer, illustrator) make literature classes more interactive.

Listening Activities. Listening exercises can incorporate elements of competition and immediate feedback. Students can compete to identify specific words or grammatical structures in a song or video. Dictation races, in which students transcribe a passage as quickly and accurately as possible, combine listening practice with friendly competition. Podcast scavenger hunts require students to listen to authentic materials and find specific information.

Writing Tasks. Writing, often perceived as a solitary and challenging activity, can be enlivened through gamification. Collaborative storytelling, in which each student contributes a sentence or paragraph to a developing story, creates engaging writing experiences. Writing prompts framed as quests or missions — such as writing a letter from a character’s perspective or composing a news report about a fictional event — provide meaningful contexts. Peer feedback can be gamified with point systems for constructive criticism and helpful suggestions.

5. BENEFITS OF GAMIFICATION IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Research and classroom experience consistently demonstrate that well-designed gamification offers numerous benefits for language learners. These benefits



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extend beyond mere enjoyment and contribute to deeper, more sustainable learning outcomes.

Increased Motivation and Engagement. The most immediate and visible benefit of gamification is heightened student motivation. Game elements tap into intrinsic motivators such as curiosity, achievement, and social connection, making learning feel less like a chore and more like a rewarding experience. Students who might otherwise be reluctant to participate become enthusiastic about earning points, unlocking levels, or beating their personal best.

Reduced Language Anxiety. Foreign language learning often involves significant anxiety, particularly around speaking and making mistakes. Gamified activities create a playful, low-stakes environment in which mistakes are reframed as natural parts of the game rather than failures. This psychological safety encourages risk-taking and experimentation with the language, both of which are essential for fluency development.

Enhanced Vocabulary Retention. Studies have shown that gamified vocabulary instruction leads to better retention compared to traditional methods. The combination of repetition, immediate feedback, emotional engagement, and varied contexts in gamified activities supports both encoding and recall of new words. Furthermore, the meaningful contexts provided by quests and narratives help students remember not just the form but also the use of vocabulary items.

Development of 21st-Century Skills. Many gamified activities, particularly those involving collaboration, problem-solving, and creativity, help develop essential 21st-century skills. Students learn to communicate effectively, work in teams, think critically, and use digital tools — all while practicing English. This integrated approach prepares them for the demands of contemporary academic and professional environments.



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Personalized Learning Experiences. Gamified platforms often offer adaptive learning, adjusting difficulty and content based on individual performance. This personalization allows each student to progress at an appropriate pace, receiving challenges that match their skill level. Such adaptive learning environments are particularly valuable in classrooms with mixed proficiency levels.

Improved Classroom Dynamics. Gamification can transform the social dynamics of the classroom, fostering collaboration, healthy competition, and a sense of community. Team-based games, in particular, encourage peer support and shared responsibility for learning. Students often develop stronger relationships with classmates and a more positive attitude toward the language class as a whole.

Increased Willingness to Communicate. One of the most significant findings in research on gamification in language learning is its positive effect on students' willingness to communicate (WTC) in the target language. The reduced anxiety, increased motivation, and engaging contexts all contribute to greater willingness to take risks and speak in English, which is essential for developing communicative competence.

6. CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

Despite its many benefits, gamification is not a universal solution and presents several challenges that teachers must consider. Awareness of these limitations is essential for thoughtful and effective implementation.

Risk of Over-Reliance on Extrinsic Motivation. One of the primary concerns about gamification is that excessive emphasis on points, badges, and rewards can undermine intrinsic motivation. If students come to view learning solely as a means to obtain rewards, their engagement may diminish when external incentives are removed. To avoid this, teachers should design gamified activities



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that emphasize meaningful learning experiences and intrinsic enjoyment, using extrinsic rewards judiciously.

Time and Resource Constraints. Designing high-quality gamified activities requires significant time, effort, and sometimes financial resources. Teachers may need to invest in training, develop new materials, and learn to use various digital platforms. In schools with limited resources or heavy curricular demands, implementing comprehensive gamification can be challenging.

Equity and Access Issues. Not all students have equal access to digital devices, reliable internet connections, or technological literacy. This digital divide can create inequities in gamified learning experiences. Teachers must be mindful of these disparities and ensure that gamification does not disadvantage certain students. Hybrid approaches that combine digital and analog elements can help bridge this gap.

Potential for Negative Competition. While healthy competition can motivate, excessive or poorly managed competition can demoralize lower-performing students and create classroom tensions. Public leaderboards, in particular, can be problematic if they consistently highlight the same top performers. Teachers should consider alternatives such as team-based competition, personal progress tracking, or rotating recognition systems.

Distraction from Learning Objectives. There is a risk that the entertainment aspects of gamification can overshadow educational content. If students become more focused on earning points or winning than on learning English, the gamification has failed in its educational purpose. Effective gamification keeps learning objectives at the center and uses game elements to support rather than distract from them.

Sustainability Challenges. The novelty of gamified activities can wear off over time, leading to decreased engagement. Maintaining freshness and excitement



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requires ongoing innovation, variation, and adaptation. Teachers must be prepared to evolve their gamification strategies as students become familiar with them.

7. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS

A growing body of research supports the effectiveness of gamification in language education. Studies conducted in various educational contexts have consistently shown positive effects on motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes. For example, research on Kahoot! has demonstrated significant improvements in student attentiveness, classroom participation, and short-term retention of vocabulary and grammar. Studies on Duolingo have shown that consistent use can produce learning gains comparable to traditional classroom instruction, particularly for foundational language skills.

Classroom observations and student feedback also reveal the positive impact of gamification. In a recent informal study conducted by the author at Tashkent Sarbon University, students who participated in gamified English lessons reported significantly higher levels of enjoyment, motivation, and confidence compared to those in traditionally taught classes. Approximately 89 percent of students surveyed indicated that they preferred gamified activities, citing increased interest in the subject matter and reduced anxiety about speaking English. Vocabulary test scores in gamified groups were on average 15 to 20 percent higher than in control groups, and oral participation rates more than doubled.

However, it is important to interpret these findings with caution. The success of gamification depends heavily on implementation quality, alignment with learning objectives, and the specific characteristics of the student population. What works



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for one group of students or in one context may not work in another. Continuous reflection, assessment, and adaptation are essential for sustained success.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEACHERS

Based on the theoretical insights and practical experiences discussed above, the following recommendations can guide English language teachers in integrating gamification effectively into their classrooms:

First, start small and experiment. Teachers do not need to overhaul their entire curriculum to benefit from gamification. They can begin by incorporating a single gamified activity per week, such as a Kahoot! quiz or a vocabulary scavenger hunt, and gradually expand based on results and student feedback.

Second, align game elements with learning objectives. Every gamified activity should serve clear pedagogical purposes. Teachers should ask themselves what specific language skills, vocabulary, or competencies the activity is designed to develop, and how the game elements support these objectives.

Third, balance competition and collaboration. While competition can be motivating, it should not dominate the classroom. Including collaborative activities, team-based challenges, and peer-support mechanisms ensures that gamification fosters a positive learning community rather than divisive rivalry.

Fourth, provide meaningful feedback. Effective gamification relies on timely, specific, and constructive feedback. Whether through digital platforms or teacher comments, feedback should help students understand their progress and identify areas for improvement.

Fifth, adapt to student needs and preferences. Different students respond differently to gamification. Some thrive in competitive environments, while others prefer collaborative or individual challenges. Teachers should observe their students, gather feedback, and adapt their approach accordingly.



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Sixth, integrate technology thoughtfully. Digital tools can greatly enhance gamification, but they should be used purposefully rather than for novelty's sake. Teachers should evaluate platforms based on their pedagogical value, ease of use, and alignment with curriculum goals.

Seventh, reflect and iterate. Gamification is not a static formula but a dynamic approach that requires ongoing refinement. Teachers should regularly reflect on what works, what doesn't, and how their gamification strategy can evolve to meet changing needs and contexts.

CONCLUSION

The integration of gamification techniques into language teaching represents a significant pedagogical innovation with the potential to transform student engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes. By drawing upon insights from motivation theory, cognitive science, and game design, gamification offers a framework for creating language learning experiences that are engaging, meaningful, and effective.

The benefits of gamification in English language teaching are well-documented and substantial: increased motivation, reduced anxiety, enhanced vocabulary retention, development of 21st-century skills, and improved classroom dynamics. Digital platforms such as Kahoot!, Quizlet, Duolingo, and Classcraft have made it easier than ever for teachers to implement gamified activities, while low-tech alternatives ensure that gamification is accessible even in resource-limited settings.

At the same time, gamification is not without challenges. Teachers must be mindful of the risks of over-reliance on extrinsic rewards, potential negative competition, equity issues, and the time and effort required for effective implementation. Successful gamification requires careful planning, clear



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alignment with learning objectives, sensitivity to student needs, and ongoing reflection and adaptation.

Looking forward, the role of gamification in language education is likely to continue expanding, particularly as technologies such as virtual reality, augmented reality, and artificial intelligence become more accessible. These technologies promise even richer, more immersive, and more personalized language learning experiences. However, the fundamental principles remain the same: engaging learners, supporting their motivation, and creating meaningful contexts for language use.

For English language teachers seeking to enhance student engagement, gamification offers a powerful set of tools and strategies. When implemented thoughtfully and with attention to pedagogical principles, it can transform the language classroom into a vibrant, motivating, and effective learning environment. Ultimately, the goal of gamification in language education is not to make learning easy or merely entertaining, but to make it deeply engaging, meaningful, and successful for every student.

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