

Gamification: Trends and Opportunities in Language Teaching and Learning Practices

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Article information	
Abstract	Gamification is a controversial topic in the field of education, with both proponents and opponents. However, what exactly gamification is and why it has become popular are worth exploring. This academic article first defines the terms “game” and “gamification” in order to differentiate them. Next, the article provides core features of gamification in an educational context as explained by previous studies and pinpoints the disparity between the concept of gamification and game-based learning in practice. Additionally, the positive impact of gamification in language learning and gamification and game-based research activities that bridge the concept of gamified information systems are discussed. The article concludes with future research directions for gamification in language teaching and learning.
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1. Introduction

The regulation of teaching and learning in English classes has swung during the past decade (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Spilitopoulos, 2011; Thomas et al. 2013). As a result, English language teachers are having challenging tasks preparing their instruction to fit in with their new classroom context (Baker & Jarunthawatchai, 2017). As explained by Darasawang (2007) and Chinnawongs et al. (2003), traditional English classrooms have relied heavily on outmoded grammar translation, rote memorization, and teacher-centered methods of teaching although the communicative language teaching approach (CLT) is recommended. This is in line with what is happening to English language teaching and learning in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. Thai English teachers have to adjust and develop new teaching strategies which may keep their students interested (Baker & Jarunthawatchai, 2017). In other words, the traditional English classroom, where the “chalk and talk” or “the teacher-centered” method is used may not work well in the present situation.

As we all know, students in this era are more digitally literate than those in the past decades. Some materials which were attractive to students in the years before may no longer be effectively used in the present-day English classroom (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Spilitopoulos, 2011; Thomas et al., 2013). For instance, students nowadays communicate with their friends using various online platforms, and they can express their life experiences via several social networks which can be shared globally in a minute, something that never happened to students decades ago. In addition, gamification is now being used by many ELT practitioners as part of their teaching methodologies. Kaplan University, for example, has integrated gamification software into its learning management system and conducted a trial project in one of its courses, reporting that this resulted in a nine percent increase in student grades and a 16 percent increase in course completion (NMC-Horizon Report, 2014). Similarly, Figueroa (2015) has reported on the success of the incorporation of gaming features like badges for students who

completed curriculum-based “missions” and activities at the Deloitte Leadership Academy. Another empirical study from the EFL context is a commercial game application called “Classcraft” which was used to enhance students’ vocabulary in a flipped classroom at a private school in Thailand (Botmart, 2019). The results reported were in accordance with prior investigations that students had higher scores after the game was applied during the course and retention of vocabulary knowledge appeared to be better than those of the students who were in the control group with no game.

The aforementioned studies exemplify that gamification in education allows students to interact with one another in the same way that a social game does. Another key point to consider is that when people experience any type of social presence, they are more likely to express natural emotions like delight, empathy, and irritation, as well as adhere to social conventions like turn-taking (Fogg, 2002). This kind of experience can be effectively incorporated into a classroom environment, and English teachers can adopt such digital tools in their classrooms in order to motivate students to learn in class as well as to provide more time for them to learn outside the class (Cho et al., 2021).

Recently, the teaching and learning norms in the classroom have been affected by digital disruption as mentioned above. Students can learn and work on their subject matter outside the classroom via different online platforms (Tapinta, 2016; Zhou & Chen, 2020). Thus, ELT practitioners these days have to develop teaching materials or learning platforms that can involve students’ participation and enhance independent learning skills. This partly leads to the fast adoption of gamification and the usage of game aspects in education. Gamification refers to the use of game design features in non-game contexts for the aim of encouraging desirable behaviors of individuals or addressing certain issues of interest (Raczkowski, 2014). Numerous investigations have been conducted in an effort to comprehend the use of gamification in educational settings. This paper examines

the definition of gamification and its elements which are in relation to language teaching and learning. Moreover, this paper also describes the comparison between the terms “gamification” and “game-based learning.” Towards the end of this paper, the authentic application of gamification in teaching and learning and its positive results are illustrated.

2. What Is Gamification?

The origin of the word gamification should be explained before we can go any further in describing or defining the concept of gamification. What exactly is a game? There have been efforts made to define the term “game,” one of the most accurate of which is the one proposed in Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman’s book *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Tekinbas & Zimmerman, 2003) that “a game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome” (p. 80).

In his book *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*, Raph Koster (2005) sees games as puzzles to be solved and provide lessons to be learned, stating “it is the act of solving puzzles that makes game fun. In other words, with games, learning is the drug” (p. 40).

These two definitions have one thing in common: they all use characteristics that are generally thought of as “fun” or “game-like” to encourage learning and engagement. The process of “gamification” is expected to result in good effects on learning and desirable behavioral changes. Think about this—choosing whether to take the stairs or the escalator is not usually a fun decision, but when you add keys that play music when you walk on them, fun becomes a huge game-changing factor. Graphing your runs and challenging yourself and others to get to the next level provides feedback and interactivity that is not normally available. Learning to be safe is a serious undertaking but putting an individual in a safe setting and allowing him or her to gain experience via trials and

errors that allow for a certain amount of failure can even be more beneficial. Leadership training classes are often dull, dry, and politicized, whereas heading a guild and getting experience motivating troops to complete a raid is fun. A board game is usually designated for a family fun night, but when correctly structured and played in a corporate setting, it can provide insights that would not be attainable otherwise.

When used correctly as exemplified, game-based tactics often known as gamification have the ability to engage, inform, and educate people. The term gamification is defined by Gabe Zichermann, the author of the book entitled *Game-Based Marketing*, as “the process of leveraging game ideas and mechanics to engage audiences and solve problems” (Zicherman & Linder, 2010). Moreover, gamification is described as “using game methods to make activities more engaging and exciting,” according to Amy Jo Kim, author of *Community Building on the Web* and a well-known designer of social games (Medica Ružić & Dumančić , 2015). Combining elements from these definitions and getting rid of the emphasis on getting people to do things they ordinarily consider boring results in the definition of the term gamification as using game-based mechanics, aesthetics, and games to engage people, motivate action, promote learning, and solve problems.

3. Features of Gamification

In numerous ways, gamification enhances the learning experience in academic, industrial, and business contexts. Several instances of gamification in education can assist teachers in developing their own teaching strategies. However, before we delve into specific examples, let us examine each element of the definition that should be considered in a teaching and learning setting.

Gamification incorporates the concepts defined in the above-mentioned definition of “game.” The goal of gamification is to develop a system in which

learners, players, consumers, and employees participate in an abstract task that is defined by rules, interaction, and feedback that result in a quantifiable outcome that elicits an emotional response. Simply put, the goal of gamification is to build a game that encourages players to engage their brainpower, time, and energy. The following are the main components that are required in gamification.

Mechanics: Levels, badges, point systems, scores, and time limits are all part of the game mechanics. These are the elements that can be found in a variety of video games. Mechanics alone are insufficient to transform a mundane experience into a fun game, but they are essential building blocks in the gamification process.

Aesthetics: Gamification cannot be successful without compelling graphics or a well-designed experience. In the gamification process, the user interface, or the appearance and feel of an experience, is critical. An individual's readiness to adopt gamification is heavily influenced by how he or she perceives an event visually through aesthetic elements.

Thinking: This is possibly the most crucial aspect of gamification. It is the idea of taking a mundane activity like jogging or running and turning it into a game with aspects of rivalry, teamwork, exploration, and storytelling (Medica Ružić & Dumančić, 2015). In a game-based learning atmosphere, friends compete against one another while simultaneously offering encouragement, another element that can sustain players' interest in the game.

Engage: The gamification method has the specific objective of capturing an individual's attention and involving him or her in the process that has been built. Simply put, gamification is primarily concerned with increasing individual engagement.

People: Learners, consumers, and players are all examples. These are the people who are involved in the process of the game during which they are inspired to take action.

Motivation: Motivation is a process that energizes and gives meaning to an individual's actions and behaviors. Individuals must be inspired by a challenge that is neither too difficult nor too easy while being engaged in a game.

Learning: As many of the features of gamification are founded on educational psychology and are strategies that instructional designers, instructors, and academics have utilized for years, gamification may be used to increase learning. Educational practitioners' staples have included things like allocating points to activities, providing corrective comments, and fostering collaborative project work. Gamification, on the other hand, adds a new layer of appeal and a new manner of weaving those aspects together into a fun game environment that both encourages and educates learners.

Problem solving: Gamification has a lot of potential in terms of teaching players how to solve problems. Because of the cooperative nature of games, more than one individual can focus on solving a problem as a team. Moreover, the competitive aspect of games motivates individuals to do their best to solve problems they are encountering so that they can accomplish the goal of winning.

4. Comparing and Contrasting Gamification and Game-Based Learning

English language instructors in the 21st century can utilize a variety of approaches when working with digital natives. Game-based learning (GBL) and gamification are among them.

However, a number of English language teachers mistakenly believe that gamification and game-based learning are the same since they share the word

“game,” but this is not the case. Gamification, on the one hand, is the application of game design philosophy to nongame applications to make them more enjoyable and engaging. It can be used in language teaching to create exciting and engaging experiences (Çeker & Özdaml, 2017). Gamification, on the other hand, is used in education to inspire and modify learner behavior by creating exciting and engaging game-like situations. Fun, intense focus, competitiveness, teamwork, retention, productivity, and creativity/exploration are all encouraged in gamification. The following are some of the advantages that a 21st-century learner will experience in a gamified classroom. Gamification helps create a fun and engaging classroom, promotes constant motivation for students to complete learning activities, enables students to become more focused and attentive to their learning, and leads to healthy competition between peers. However, even though gamification has a lot of benefits for teaching and learning, it can cause issues if it is not managed properly (Rapp et al., 2019). For example, games used in class may become predictable and boring activities, they do not create meaningful learning experiences for learners, etc.

Game-based learning, on the other hand, is a game with defined learning goals that allow learners to play to achieve such goals. According to Isaacs (2015), game-based learning refers to the use of games to enhance the learning process. Using game-based learning is believed to come with several advantages, including boosting self-directed learning and encouraging students to become problem solvers, promoting game design through students, fostering the acquisition of new modalities, and encouraging healthy competition among peers. However, it is noteworthy that there are some challenges that teachers who lack familiarity with game-based learning may have to face, such as designing clear learning objectives, ensuring that instruction is not merely play time, and dealing with technological infrastructure in the classroom.

The gamification trend is on the rise and shows no signs of abating. Through avatars, more problem-based learning, and interactive learning experiences, elements from games are making their way into language classrooms as educational institutes are incorporating game-based learning into the curriculum through audience response systems, online simulations, and interactive storytelling (Kapp, 2012).

In fact, gamification improves engagement, relevance, and immersion while also assisting with the transfer of knowledge to the real world (Cong-Lem, 2018). ELT practitioners are required to match various gaming strategies with various types of learning content in order to achieve the desired learning outcome. College professors, learning professionals, and others in the field of learning and education must understand how to apply gamification techniques to promote learning, retention, and application of knowledge among learners in a number of situations. More importantly, professionals in learning and development, as well as educators, are in a unique position to use gamification to create interactive experiences for internal employees, students, and customers.

5. Research on Gamification in Language Classrooms

Gamification in language classrooms has emerged as a captivating and promising approach to language teaching and learning. Extensive research has explored various aspects of gamification, investigating its implementation in language education and its effects on language learning outcomes. This review aims to synthesize and present the findings of relevant research studies, shedding light on the application of gamification in language classrooms and its impact on language learning.

One significant study by Hanus and Fox (2015) delved into the effects of gamification on language learning motivation and engagement. In this research, a gamified language learning platform was introduced in a university-level English

course, incorporating elements such as badges, points, and leaderboards. The results indicated that students participating in the gamified language learning experience demonstrated higher levels of motivation and engagement compared to those in traditional classrooms. Moreover, students reported a positive attitude towards language learning and a greater sense of accomplishment in reaching language learning goals.

Similarly, Ho (2020) conducted a study exploring the use of gamification in a flipped language classroom. By integrating gamified elements, including levels, achievements, and rewards, into the flipped language learning environment, the researcher sought to assess its impact on student engagement. The findings revealed that gamification enhanced student engagement and encouraged active participation in language learning activities. Students expressed a higher level of enjoyment and satisfaction with the gamified approach, leading to increased self-directed learning and improved language proficiency.

In addition to motivation and engagement, gamification has shown promising results in vocabulary acquisition. Medica Ružić and Dumančić (2015) investigated the use of gamification in a vocabulary learning context by designing a vocabulary learning app with game-like features. The gamified app included quizzes, challenges, and progress tracking. The study found that students using the gamified app outperformed those using traditional methods in terms of vocabulary retention and recall. The game-based approach provided an interactive and immersive environment, facilitating better memory retention and more effective vocabulary learning.

Furthermore, gamification has been successfully applied to foster speaking skills in language classrooms. To exemplify, Thorne, Fischer, and Lu (2012) explored the integration of gamified online language exchanges into language courses. They introduced an online game world where students interacted with

native speakers and engaged in language exchange activities. The gamified language exchange platform not only enhanced students' speaking abilities but also promoted intercultural communication and meaningful interactions with native speakers.

While the majority of research on gamification in language classrooms has shown positive outcomes, some studies have highlighted potential challenges. Rapp et al. (2019) emphasized the importance of designing gamified experiences that align with educational objectives and cater to students' preferences and needs. Clear learning objectives, meaningful rewards, and balanced competition were highlighted as essential factors to avoid potential drawbacks of gamification such as superficial engagement and decreased intrinsic motivation.

In conclusion, research on gamification in language classrooms provides compelling evidence for its positive impact on language learning outcomes. Gamification enhances motivation, engagement, vocabulary acquisition, speaking skills, and intercultural communication. Language educators should carefully design gamified language learning experiences that align with pedagogical goals and consider students' preferences and needs. By effectively integrating gamification into language classrooms, educators can create dynamic and interactive learning environments that foster language skill development and empower students to become proficient language users.

7. Gamification: From Theory to Practice

The gamification trend is on the rise and shows no signs of abating. Through avatars, more problem-based learning, and interactive learning experiences, elements from games are making their way into language classrooms as educational institutes are incorporating game-based learning into the curriculum through audience response systems, online simulations, and interactive storytelling (Kapp, 2012). Games contain numerous elements that make them

effective vehicles for education. Typically, they are structured so that players (language learners in this case) must solve a problem which is an essential skill not only for their education but also for life after graduation (Stieglitz et al., 2017). Several games encourage communication, cooperation, and even competition between players. Some of the most immersive games have a narrative that inspires players' creativity and imagination. The structural components of games are also particularly well-suited to serve the current generation of students. In the realm of education, gamification is gaining momentum: with success stories like Classcraft, Class Dojo, and Rezzly leading the way, gamification will inevitably spread to more and more classrooms. There are also pockets of educators designing their own "gamefully designed" learning environments.

The following is the application of gamification in classrooms as suggested by Sailer and Homner (2020):

Giving points for meeting academic objectives

Points awarded for achieving goals can be an effective way to motivate students. It can also help track progress and boost participation.

Giving points for accomplishing non-academic objectives

Teachers can also award points for non-academic goals such as classroom cleanliness or teamwork. This motivates students to achieve both academic and nonacademic objectives, which contributes to their overall success.

Reflecting on personalized performance

Reflecting on individual performance assists students in identifying and monitoring their progress. It is an effective method for them to self-evaluate what they have learned, predict the outcomes of future behavior, and determine how far they must go to achieve success.

Using different methods of "progression"

Using levels and checkpoints can give students the impression that they are advancing through the game. This motivates them to find out what happens next, which maintains their focus on learning.

Providing the option to give badges rather than points

Badges are also effective at motivating and encouraging students. Badges are an effective alternative to points for introducing a competitive element into the classroom. They can also foster a sense of community and increase classroom engagement, which is fantastic for academic achievement.

Using different platforms or applications

Utilizing various platforms or applications is a fantastic way to maintain students' interest. Teachers can increase students' engagement through the use of tablets, smartphones, and other devices that enable them to access their learning resources whenever and wherever they choose. Using technology in this manner helps increase student engagement and motivation, which are both essential for effective language learning.

9. Using Gamification in Language Classrooms to Develop Different Skills

Gamification presents a versatile and promising approach to fostering various language skills within language classrooms. By integrating game-based elements and mechanics into language learning activities, educators can create engaging and effective learning experiences that cater to different skill areas. Vocabulary acquisition, for instance, can be enhanced through gamified flashcards and word-matching games, providing immediate feedback and encouraging repetitive practice (King, 2022). Likewise, speaking proficiency can be honed through role-playing simulations, allowing students to assume different roles and engage in target language conversations such as simulating restaurant scenarios to practice ordering food and making inquiries (Ho, 2020).

To develop listening and reading comprehension, interactive story-based games immerse students in scenarios that challenge them to follow instructions and comprehend dialogues, thus fostering improved comprehension skills (Thorne et al., 2012). For enhancing writing skills, gamified writing quests can prompt students to produce creative stories, essays, or journal entries, with the allure of rewards motivating them to express themselves in writing and improve their written communication (Tapinta, 2016).

In the realm of grammar and sentence structure, gamified grammar quizzes present rules and challenges interactively, enabling students to earn points or badges for correctly applying grammar concepts in sentences or conversations (Zhou & Chen, 2020). Moreover, gamification can promote intercultural communication through virtual language exchange platforms, engaging students in gamified conversations and cultural challenges, thereby providing valuable insights into different cultures (Murray & Fujishima, 2013). Additionally, multiplayer language games facilitate collaborative learning and teamwork, as students collaborate in language quests to achieve shared objectives, encouraging peer support and cooperation (Rackowski, 2014).

Beyond language acquisition, gamified language learning can foster valuable skills. Time-limited language challenges, such as language marathons or tasks with specific timeframes, enhance students' time management skills (Sailer & Homner, 2020). Personalized learning paths and progress tracking in gamified language learning platforms promote self-directed learning, allowing students to set goals and autonomously monitor their progress (Ungerleider, 2022).

Furthermore, gamification can target pronunciation practice through mini-games, where students mimic and match target language sounds, receiving immediate feedback and scoring to motivate them to refine their pronunciation skills (Rapp et al., 2019). By incorporating gamification into language classrooms,

educators can create a dynamic and interactive learning environment, motivating students to actively engage with language contents and develop various language skills. The integration of gamified language activities provides students with a sense of accomplishment and progress, enhancing language learning by making it enjoyable and effective.

In conclusion, gamification in language classrooms presents a promising and innovative approach to language teaching and learning. By incorporating game-based elements and mechanics, educators can create engaging and interactive learning experiences that foster various language skills. From vocabulary acquisition to speaking proficiency, listening comprehension to writing skills, grammar practice to intercultural communication, and more, gamified language activities offer diverse opportunities for skill development. Moreover, gamification goes beyond language acquisition, promoting valuable skills such as time management, self-directed learning, and collaborative teamwork.

As the gamification trend continues to rise and gain traction, language educators have a unique opportunity to harness the potential of gamified language learning environments. By integrating gamification effectively, language teachers can create dynamic and motivating learning spaces that encourage student participation, boost engagement, and enhance language skill development. Future research in this area should continue exploring the interaction between gamification and various language skills, examining the impact on students' motivation, learning outcomes, and long-term language proficiency. By embracing gamification in language teaching practices, educators can open new avenues for empowering students to become confident and proficient language users.

10. Benefits of Gamification in Language Classrooms for Language Skill Development

Gamification in language classrooms has proven to be a powerful tool with significant benefits, positively impacting the development of various language skills. One of the primary advantages is its ability to enhance language motivation and engagement. Through gamified language activities that incorporate elements such as points, badges, and rewards, students become more enthusiastic and interested in the learning process (Hanus & Fox, 2015). The heightened motivation leads to increased student participation and active involvement in language learning activities.

Moreover, gamification plays a vital role in improving vocabulary acquisition. In a study conducted by Botmart (2019), the application of a gamified learning platform called “Classcraft” in a flipped classroom environment resulted in improved vocabulary retention compared to traditional methods. The interactive nature of gamified language activities allows students to encounter and practice new words in meaningful contexts, leading to better vocabulary retention and recall.

In addition to vocabulary enhancement, gamification fosters the development of communication and interaction skills in language learners. Many gamified language activities require collaboration and communication among students. Multiplayer language games, for instance, encourage students to interact in the target language to achieve common goals, thereby fostering the development of authentic communication and interpersonal skills (Murray & Fujishima, 2013).

Furthermore, gamification proves particularly effective in enhancing listening and reading comprehension skills. Language games often integrate audio and visual elements, providing ample opportunities for students to practice their listening and reading skills. Immersive games with engaging narratives, as

highlighted by Ho (2020), challenge students to follow instructions, comprehend dialogues, and interpret visual cues, thus improving their receptive language skills.

Moreover, gamification significantly contributes to increased speaking proficiency. Gamified activities that involve role-playing, simulations, and interactive dialogues provide opportunities for students to practice speaking in a low-stress environment. Language learning platforms with conversational bots or virtual language exchanges, for example, allow students to practice speaking the target language with confidence.

Likewise, writing skill enhancement is another valuable benefit of gamification. Games that involve storytelling or creative writing elements require students to express themselves in writing. By completing missions or quests, students are encouraged to produce written content in the target language, leading to improved writing proficiency (Thorne, Fischer, & Lu, 2012).

Finally, gamified language learning platforms promote autonomy and self-directed learning. Students can progress at their own pace and choose learning pathways that interest them, fostering a sense of ownership in their language learning journey (Cong-Lem, 2018). This empowerment encourages students to take initiative and responsibility for their learning, leading to more effective language skill development.

In conclusion, the integration of gamification in language classrooms offers a wide range of benefits that contribute to language skill development in an engaging and enjoyable manner. By harnessing the motivational power of games, language educators can create dynamic and immersive learning environments that cater to the diverse needs of their students. Incorporating gamification into language teaching practices can lead to improved language motivation, vocabulary acquisition, communication and interaction skills, listening and reading

comprehension, speaking proficiency, writing skills, and self-directed learning. Apparently, these benefits collectively create an enriching language learning experience for students.

11. Conclusion and Future Research Directions

In conclusion, the incorporation of gamification in language classrooms has shown great potential to transform language teaching and learning practices, fostering a more engaging and motivating environment for students. By leveraging game mechanics, aesthetics, thinking, engagement, motivation, and problem-solving elements, educators can create dynamic and interactive learning experiences that enhance language proficiency and student involvement. The insightful notions presented in this academic article demonstrate the positive impact of gamification on language learning outcomes. Language learners who engage in gamified language activities exhibit increased motivation, active participation, and improved language acquisition. The integration of gamification strategies empowers students to take an active role in their language-learning journey and cultivates a collaborative and enjoyable educational experience.

Looking forward, the future trends of gamification in language classrooms are promising and present exciting opportunities for further exploration. One prominent direction is the integration of immersive technologies, such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR), to enhance gamified language learning experiences. VR and AR can provide authentic and context-rich language scenarios, enabling students to practice language skills in simulated real-world settings, thereby enhancing their language comprehension and communication abilities.

Additionally, the development of personalized learning algorithms and adaptive gamification platforms can revolutionize language education. By tailoring language instruction to individual learners' needs and preferences, personalized

gamified learning experiences can optimize language skill development and foster a more inclusive and effective educational environment. Furthermore, the integration of gamification into online language learning platforms and mobile applications is expected to expand rapidly. As technology continues to advance, incorporating gamified elements into digital language learning tools will offer learners the flexibility to access engaging language activities and resources anytime and anywhere, facilitating continuous language skill improvement and self-paced learning.

However, while gamification in language teaching has shown remarkable benefits, further research is required to examine its long-term effects and sustainability. Investigating the transferability of gamified language learning outcomes to real-world language use and exploring the impact on various learner profiles, such as different age groups, proficiency levels, and cultural backgrounds, are important avenues for future investigation. Additionally, exploring the role of gamification in promoting intercultural competence and fostering cross-cultural communication skills could open new possibilities for creating more culturally aware and globally connected language learners.

In conclusion, gamification in language classrooms presents a promising approach to enhance language teaching and learning practices. As the field of gamification continues to evolve, it is crucial for educators and researchers to explore innovative applications, address potential challenges, and refine implementation strategies to maximize its positive impact on language education.

13. About the Authors

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