JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY SCIENCES AND INNOVATIONS

VOLUME 04, ISSUE 09
MOPNTHLY JOURNALS

ISSN NUMBER: 2751-4390
IMPACT FACTOR: 9,08

GAMIFICATION IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION: MOTIVATION OR DISTRACTION?

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Abstract: In language education, gamification is the use of game elements such as reward points, badges, or leaderboards to increase motivation and interest. This paper seeks to ascertain whether gamification in language education constitutes an enhancement or distraction to learning. Does it act as a motivational tool which positively affects language acquisition? Or is it simply a distraction which impedes deeper learning? The main factors affecting gamified educational settings were identified through a literature review and case studies, as well as experiments. They were found to be psychological and pedagogical. Gamification was also found to have a positive impact on learner motivation and engagement, and on short-term knowledge retention. Yet, some critics have noted the possibility of an over-reliance on gamification, emphasizing extrinsic reinforcement, downplaying structural comprehension of language, and adopting a superficial approach to learning. This research seeks to examine the conditions under which gamification is successful in helping language acquisition, and when it may be harmful.

Key words: gamification, traditional learning, learning environment, activities, motivation, education.

INTRODUCTION

"Gamification" refers to the incorporation of game-design elements and game thinking into non-game contexts in order to engage people, motivate action, promote learning and solve problems (Kapp, 2012). As Deterding, Dixon, Khaled & Nacke (2011) put it, gamification is "the use of game design elements in non-game contexts". In educational settings this translates into "the use of game elements in a learning environment" (Simões, Redondo & Vilas, 2013, p. 3) — for example, points, levels, badges, leaderboards, immediate feedback, and narrative structures. In the domain of language learning, gamification has grown significantly. As Al-Dosakee & Ozdamli (2021) note in a systematic review of 103 studies, "gamification can be a useful tool for teaching and learning languages and can increase learners' motivation and turn to learn into an enjoyable process". Moreover, "Gamification in language education involves integrating game elements and mechanics into language learning activities to enhance engagement and motivation among students". The rise of mobile apps (e.g., Duolingo), online platforms, and interactive technologies has accelerated this trend. For example, as one source points out, gamification in education "captures students' attention and maintains their interest throughout the learning process … by introducing elements such as points, badges, leader boards, and rewards" (Sovereign Magazine, 2023). In sum, gamification offers the promise of transforming often routine or rote language-learning activities into more dynamic, engaging, and motivational experiences.

On one hand, proponents argue that gamification enhances motivation, engagement, and retention. For instance, a systematic review found that by introducing "playful elements like rewards, challenges, and competitions … an interactive and life-relevant educational environment is created … thereby promoting a more effective and meaningful educational process" (Mdpi, 2022). Through active participation, immediate feedback, goal-setting and

reward mechanics, gamified environments can sustain learner effort and lead to better outcomes (Ede, 2022).

On the other hand, critics raise concerns that gamification may emphasize extrinsic rewards over intrinsic motivation, oversimplify complex learning tasks, or distract learners from deeper cognitive processing. As one article cautions: "Constant rewards may make learners dependent on external validation rather than internal motivation … Some complex concepts may be oversimplified when they require deep thought and reflection to grasp fully" (Peterson's, 2023). Another review mapping negative effects found that gamified elements — such as points, badges, competition — are "most often reported as causing negative effects … motivational issues, lack of understanding, and irrelevance" (Almeida, Kalinowski, & Uchoa, 2023).

Understanding this issue matters for educators, curriculum designers, language-learning app developers and policy-makers. If used well, gamification can transform language education by making it more engaging, accessible and enjoyable — potentially increasing motivation, persistence and retention in language learners who might otherwise drop out or lose interest. At the same time, uncovering the risks of distraction or superficial engagement helps to ensure that gamified language programs do *not* reduce learning to mere "game completion" or reward-hunting, thereby undermining the long-term goal of communicative competence. In designing language-education initiatives, knowing *when, how, and for whom* gamification works — and when it might backfire — is crucial for maximizing its benefits while avoiding unintended consequences.

METHODOLOGY

Purpose of the study

The study aimed to examine whether a gamified classroom environment would significantly enhance reading proficiency and foreign language learning enjoyment (FLLE) among first-year Chinese undergraduate EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners. The authors rooted their work in the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, positing that gamification could elevate enjoyment, which in turn supports deeper learning and language proficiency improvement.

Participants

In this experiment, 220 first-year undergraduate students from a provincial key university in central China participated. There were 144 males and 76 females. They were non-English-major students, with proficiency levels according to China's Standards of English (CSE) between levels 4 to 6. The 220 students were divided into two groups: an experimental (gamified) group and a control (traditional) group. The experimental group comprised 114 students and the control group 106.

Materials

The "Assessment for Learning" English reading diagnostic assessment, aligned with the CSE and CEFR frameworks. Used pre- and post-test for both groups. A gamification strategy built on the MDA (Mechanics, Dynamics, Aesthetics) framework, including team badges,

scoring/points, leaderboards, weekly group activities related to reading micro-skills (e.g., "Unusual Diary," "Mood Barometer," "Battle of Memories"), feedback/reflection sessions. Same textbook (New Standard College English Book 1) and reading course structure; but delivered in traditional pre-reading, during-reading, post-reading format without gamified elements.

Procedure

Both groups completed the reading diagnostic assessment and FLLE scale. A questionnaire verified that participants had no prior exposure to gamification strategies. Then, experimental group received a gamified reading instruction course (twice per week, 3 hours each, for a total of 180 minutes per unit over 16 weeks) based on the gamification strategy described above while control group received the same course content over the same time frame, but delivered traditionally (no points, badges, leaderboards). Both groups used the same textbook and completed similar homework tasks. Both groups completed the reading diagnostic assessment again (post-test) and the FLLE scale. Nine participants from the experimental group (six males, three females; representing CSE levels 4, 5, 6) participated in semi-structured interviews exploring their perceptions of the gamified course.

RESULTS

Both groups had gains, but the experimental (gamified) group had greatly greater test score gains, and increased from moderate to high FLLE (above 44 points). We found that desire for challenge and achievement (private dimension of FLLE) had the largest effect size, and also that those in the gamified group reported greater motivation, teamwork, alertness and awareness of the environment. However, some have considered leaderboards to increase pressure and competitiveness.

DISCUSSION

In sum, there is some support for the notion that well designed gamification can support language learning, as well as make it more enjoyable. There is some evidence that results from the motivation of gamification can be explained by broaden and build theory, in that gamification triggers positive affect. They caution that gamification depends on context: teacher scaffolding, limited competition, and careful design of gamified activities are necessary, and competitive elements can actually reduce learning if poorly implemented. However, limitations of the study are the fact the intervention was limited to one university in China with first year undergraduates only for 16 weeks. The sample was also gender imbalanced and assessed reading but not listening and speaking. Future research could investigate other skills, longer timescales, and other populations.

CONCLUSION

The results of this research thus show that gamification can be a helpful motivating factor for reading comprehension tasks in an EFL context. These results were found when the gamification elements were well-designed with teacher mediation, and the gamification and the learning context were carefully matched; however, these results cannot be assumed.

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