

Gamification as a Learning Strategy in the English Foreign Language Classroom

La Gamificación como estrategia de aprendizaje en el aula de inglés como lengua extranjera

Cristóbal Sánchez Montiel^a**Abstract:**

Gamification has been recently incorporated into education for English language learning. Integrating game elements makes learning more interactive, fun, engaging, competitive, and goal-oriented. This study explores gamification as a learning strategy in the English Foreign Language Classroom, mainly focusing on its goal-oriented nature. This investigation aims to explore ELT Teachers' practices regarding the selection and implementation of gamification apps and platforms, and the impact of using gamification as a learning strategy in the EFL classroom. This research project, a case study, aims to interpret people's experiences through qualitative research. The data was collected through a questionnaire and focus groups at a private institution in Puebla, Mexico, providing practical insights about the integration and use of gamification. The study revealed gamification apps and platforms used by ELT teachers as well as the use of them; furthermore, it showed the benefits of using gamification as a learning strategy in the EFL classroom. The findings of this research, with their practical implications, may prove helpful for ELT teachers, providing new information that can be applied in the classroom, lesson planning, and technology in education.

Keywords:

Gamification, gamification in education, game elements, ICT, technology in the classroom

Resumen:

La gamificación se ha incorporado recientemente en la educación para el aprendizaje del inglés. Integrar los elementos del juego hace que el aprendizaje sea más interactivo, divertido, atractivo, competitivo y orientado a objetivos. Este estudio explora la gamificación como estrategia de aprendizaje en el aula de inglés como lengua extranjera, centrándose principalmente en su naturaleza orientada a objetivos. Esta investigación tiene como objetivo explorar las prácticas de los profesores de inglés en relación con la selección e implementación de aplicaciones y plataformas de gamificación, así como el impacto del uso de la gamificación como estrategia de aprendizaje en el aula de inglés como lengua extranjera. Este proyecto de investigación, un estudio de caso, tiene como objetivo interpretar las experiencias de las personas a través de la investigación cualitativa. Los datos se recopilaron mediante un cuestionario y grupos focales en una institución privada de Puebla, México, lo que proporcionó información práctica sobre la integración y el uso de la gamificación. El estudio reveló las aplicaciones y plataformas de gamificación utilizadas por los profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera, así como el uso que hacen de ellas; además, mostró los beneficios de utilizar la gamificación como estrategia de aprendizaje en el aula de inglés como lengua extranjera. Los resultados de esta investigación, con sus implicaciones prácticas, pueden resultar útiles para los profesores de inglés, ya que proporcionan nueva información que puede aplicarse en el aula, en la planificación de las clases y en la tecnología en la educación.

Palabras Clave:

Gamificación, gamificación en la educación, elementos del juego, ICT, tecnología en el aula

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Fecha de recepción: 23/03/2025, Fecha de aceptación: 11/08/2025, Fecha de publicación: 05/05/2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.29057/lc.v7i13.14774>



Introduction

Today's learners are digital natives and have a new profile. They grew up with digital technologies and have different learning styles, new attitudes towards the learning process, and higher requirements for teaching and learning (Kiryakova et al., 2014). Technology facilitates active engagement with the learning material. It makes the learning process interactive, and students learn by engaging, researching, and receiving feedback (Roy, 2019). In addition, Figueroa (2015) states that technology in education has become necessary to fortify the teaching and learning experience in the 21st century. Gamification uses game thinking, approaches, and elements in a context different from the games. Using game mechanics improves motivation and learning in formal and informal conditions (Kiryakova et al., 2014). Gamification can provide a rich learning context to help learners construct higher-level knowledge through ambiguous and challenging trial-and-error opportunities. Through games, learners can learn excitingly and entertainingly while increasing their knowledge and understanding of the subject matter (Mee et al., 2020). The motivation for this research project came about from the COVID-19 pandemic; as the author of this investigation who experienced teaching English online as a foreign language, I had to design exciting, attractive, and active classes; thus, to introduce the topics, practice the language, assessment, and engage students to the language. This research aims to facilitate and provide new insights for those teachers who use and have technology in the classrooms and to design attractive and interactive classes for their students. Additionally, this research focuses on finding out how gamification can effectively teach English as a foreign language.

Literature Review

Gamification

Gamification, as a concept, is defined as the techniques used in non-game settings and gamification in solemn games; in particular, they are not clichéd processes but rather general procedures aiming at transferring the logic and elements of play into pedagogical practices (Mee et al., 2020). On the other hand, gamification is defined as using certain game elements in a non-game context (Camacho et al., 2022). As cited in Garcia (2020), gamification is adopting game technology and design methods outside the games industry (Helgason, 2010). Furthermore, as the aim of this research, the term will be defined in terms of its use in education and language learning. Gressick and Langston (2017) highlighted that gamification in education refers to the insertion of game elements and gameful experiences in the design of learning processes. It supports learning in a variety of

contexts and subject areas; also, it addresses related attitudes, activities, and behaviors such as participatory approaches, collaboration, self-guided study, completion of assignments, making assessments more straightforward and more effective, integration of exploratory approaches to learning, and strengthening student creativity and retention.

Game Elements for Education

Figueroa (2015) provided some game elements seen in most games nowadays. Table 1 shows each element with a brief definition:

Points	Numeric accumulation based on certain activities.
Badges	Visual representation of achievements for the use shown online.
Leader boards	How the players are ranked based on success.
Progress bars/Progression	Shows the status of a player.
Performance graph	Shows player performance.
Quests	Some of the tasks, players have to fulfil in a game.
Levels	A section or part of the game.
Avatars	Visual representation of a player or alter ego.
Social elements	Relationships with other users through the game.
Rewards/reward system	System to motivate players that accomplish a quest.

Table 1. Game elements and definitions.

Ways to Gamify Learning

Blankman (2022) provides a list of examples and specific strategies of how the teacher can gamify the classroom:

Action (objectives): Action is all about doing something: striving towards objectives, helping allies, and conquering enemies. Look for games where the player tries to destroy enemy spaceships before they destroy him.

Social (competition): In many games and game genres, collaboration and competition among players are features that make the games fun. Assessments can have a social element if there is an online forum for students to discuss individual questions afterward.

Mastery (scoring): Games where winning is irrelevant or relies heavily on luck can promote strategic thinking and have the players develop mastery. A common way to incorporate the gaming element of mastery into a classroom is by playing a class trivia game.

Achievement (awards): Accomplishments within the game could be reaching a character's maximum level or getting a high score relative to one's peers. To gamify your classroom through the lens of game achievements, find ways for students to earn points and complete educational objectives to develop agency and feel accomplishment.

Immersion (roleplaying): Gamers and non-gamers alike can enjoy new places to explore and escape to, and plenty of people do not find themselves compelled by strategy or competition in games but instead are drawn to the narrative. Gamify learning by finding ways to make students feel as though they are immersed in what they are learning about.

Creativity (customization): Gamers create characters in sports games, create games themselves, or create entire worlds.

Technology in the Classroom

Integration of Information, Communication, and Technology (ICT) in education refers to using computer-based communication incorporated into the daily classroom instructional process. In conjunction with preparing students for the current digital era, teachers are the key players in using ICT in their daily classrooms (Ghavifekr & Rosdy, 2015). Technology is an integral part of students' lives. Incorporating technology into the classroom has proved beneficial, yet it also has some drawbacks (Carstens et al., 2021). Technology in the classroom allows teachers to make a smooth shift into individualized instruction and concentrate on the developmentally appropriate use of technology for different ages and material content (Aldridge & Goldman, 2007, as cited in Baba, 2014).

Technology has a positive impact on student learning. Technology causes students to be engaged; thus, students retain more information. Because of the rapid arrival of new technologies globally, technology is relevant to students. Technology provides meaningful learning experiences. Technology also provides hands-on learning opportunities that can be integrated into all school curricular areas, including mathematics, reading, science, social studies, and other academic subjects. It allows students to collaborate with their peers, resulting in learning from each other. These factors combined can positively impact student learning and motivation (Costley, 2014).

Teaching English in the 21st Century

According to Al Bahal (2019), English Language classrooms need to be filled with meaningful and intellectually stimulating activities, practices, and processes that allow students not just to articulate thoughts and ideas effectively using oral, written, and

nonverbal communication but also to understand complex ideas, use multiple media and technologies, make judgments and decisions, and work creatively with others. As a result, teachers should be aware of the importance of 21st-century skills, and the curriculum should be tailored to meet the needs of this century (Al Bahal, 2019, as cited in Chehimi & Alameddine, 2022). In the 21st century, students should be taught the 21st-century skills that prepare them for successful learning, life, and work. Based on this phenomenon, teachers must be ready and responsive to face the educational challenges of the 21st century (Handayani, 2017).

Methodology

This research was carried out through qualitative research. Qualitative research is a form of social action that focuses on how people interpret and make sense of their experiences to understand the social reality of individuals (Zohrabi, 2013, as cited in Kumar, 2018). Therefore, this investigation is a case study exploring ELT teachers' practices of using gamification as a learning strategy in the EFL classroom. To understand a real-life phenomenon, case study research requires in-depth investigation into an individual, group, or event (Coombs, 2022). This study analyzes a particular group of teachers teaching English through gamification.

The study was conducted in a private school in Puebla, Mexico. This institution has classes from kindergarten to high school, and English is a program subject; the classes are from Monday to Friday. Furthermore, this private institution has classrooms designed and equipped only for English classes. Students go to these classrooms when they have their English class, and the classrooms have giant TV screens, speakers, computers, and iPads.

Three experienced ELT teachers from this institution, ranging from 28 to 30 years old, were interviewed for the study. They are called as Teacher 1, Teacher 2, Teacher 3. In addition, these teachers were chosen due to their constant use of technology and the implementation of gamification as a learning strategy inside their EFL classrooms. This investigation aimed to explore ELT Teachers' practices regarding the selection and implementation of gamification apps and platforms, and the impact of using gamification as a learning strategy in the EFL classroom. The research questions are:

RQ1: Which gamification apps and platforms are mostly selected and used for by ELT teachers in the EFL classroom?

RQ2: What is the ELT teachers' perception regarding the impact and the benefits of using gamification as a learning strategy on students' engagement and learning outcomes?

A questionnaire and a focus group were applied to answer the research questions. The questionnaire was designed and then uploaded to Google Forms to get the data; it will gather data on the gamification tools and implementation practices employed by experienced teachers (see Appendix 1). The focus group instrument included open-ended questions. This instrument was used to explore deeply the benefits and effects on using gamification in face-to-face interaction with each other (see Appendix 2).

Findings

The information gathered from the two instruments described above helped answer the research questions of this research project. After analysing the data, it was classified into four sections: gamification apps and platforms in the EFL classroom, the development of students' English skills and subskills, the benefits of gamification on students' English language learning, and the effects of gamification on students' English language learning.

Gamification apps and platforms in the EFL classroom

The following figure shows the results obtained from a multiple-choice item used in the questionnaire. Participants highlighted the gamification apps and online platforms they use in the EFL classroom and added some more. The results are shown below:

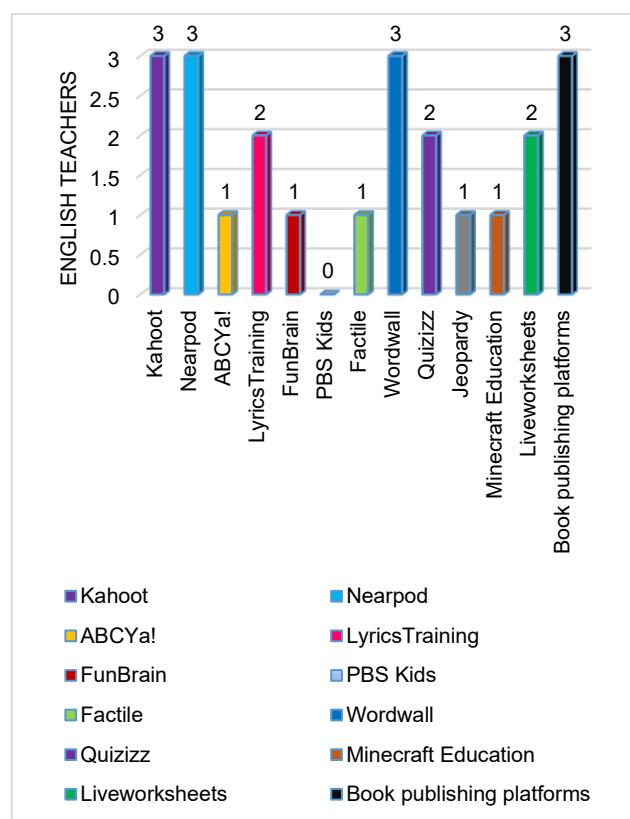


Figure 1. Gamification apps used in the EFL classroom by ELT teachers.

Figure 1 shows the gamification apps and platforms ELT teachers use in EFL classrooms. They chose the apps and online platforms they use most from a multiple-choice item and revealed some more that they frequently use in their classes. They commented the following:

Teacher 1: "I normally look for dynamic activities where students can interact with classmates or me. I use some digital platforms to make English classes attractive, interactive, and joyful for the students."

Teacher 2: "I always try to design attractive English classes and to make this happen, I always look for educational platforms that complement my lesson planning. I do this for my students have fun but at the same time they can learn and practice English. It makes that we have a good time of learning and teaching between teacher and students, and this would not be possible without the use of technology"

Teacher 3: "I look for complementing activities, this is not just to follow the book program, this is looking for digital resources that can complement my lesson planning. I always take advantages of technology to do this because nowadays there are a variety of platforms"

The development of students' English skills and subskills

This research shows that students develop their English skills and even some subskills using gamification in EFL classrooms. Lui (2012) claims that students prefer using online games to learn vocabulary because they are more fun and exciting and facilitate vocabulary retention. This was also gathered from the focus groups that teachers use gamification to review and practice vocabulary; some ELT teachers mentioned the following:

Teacher 1: "Vocabulary they tend to remember better new words they used or need to use to win a game"

Teacher 2: "Some apps have helped my students to review the topics seen in previous classes or to carry out a full class, identify the vocabulary when they memorize or learn it"

Teacher 3: "In my own experience, my students have increased their vocabulary because one of the objectives of using gamification is practicing the vocabulary of different topics, this is just to make sure if they identify it or if they really understood how to use it in real contexts"

Furthermore, teachers stated that with gamification in the EFL classroom, students could develop other skills and

subskills such as listening, reading, writing, and grammar. The following quotes are what the teachers mentioned:

Teacher 2: "Some apps have helped my students to improve their listening, speaking, and even reading skill because we make activities on some apps where they can fill in the lyrics by listening and singing their favorite English songs. Students listen and read books at the same time, and they are improving pronunciation as well"

Teacher 3: "In my own experience, my students have increased their grammar because one of the objectives of using gamification is practice structures of any tense, this is just to make sure if they really understood how to use the language in real contexts. Moreover, students improve their writing skill when they practice grammar because as teachers, we design activities in which students use correct grammar when they write any word or statements"

The Benefits of gamification on students' English Language learning

Figueroa (2015) stated that using Gamification in L2 learning has brought many tools to enhance the language learning process and motivate the learners. Moreover, based on what was shared in the focus groups and what teachers answered in the questionnaire, gamification promotes motivation in the students' learning process. The next quotes show the teacher's perspectives:

Teacher 2: "Students show very motivated when using gamification, they motivate themselves to continue learning because they want to be in the podium or see their names in the scoreboard. Once they achieved it, they keep that motivation in every single class"

Teacher 3: "Students feel motivated because they show joyful in the EFL classroom when we do activities using these platforms"

In addition, teachers commented that students become more technological with gamification. They also added that students learn English to compete in a global world. The following are the statements that teachers said:

Teacher 2: "Students become technological, they learn how to use the apps by themselves, they improve they usage of electronical devices such as cell phones, iPad, and computers"

Teacher 1: "Students are learning English as a Foreign Language in a very technological way; they are developing different skills that allow them to compete in a globalized world"

The effects of gamification on students' English language learning

Gamification techniques promote learners' motivation, engagement, and performance mainly by establishing a comparative learning environment that influences how a student learns, not necessarily the context itself. This includes creating a fun statement among students that encourages them to engage more with the learning task, thus increasing their interest and motivation (Alomari et al., 2019). What was collected from the discussions from the focus groups, and what teachers expressed in the questionnaire: Gamification generates a lot of positive feelings and emotions in students. Furthermore, it creates a fun and exciting environment in the EFL classroom. Teachers stated the following:

Teacher 2: "There is a lot of excitement in my English classes because when using gamification my students clap, dance, laugh, shout, help each other and everybody wants to win, be in the podium or get the award and this makes students motivated and excited when learning English"

Teacher 3: "When I use gamification my students show positive attitude towards the class, they always ask if we are using these apps for every English class. Also, students show excitement and fun because when we are doing an activity, they laugh all the time, sometimes they stand up and do body movements when they see their progress in the game"

Discussion

This study shows ELT Teachers' practices on using gamification for English language learning, the tools, the benefits, as well as the impact in the EFL classroom. This research highlights that applications promote a gamified learning experience and motivate students' learning. The most popular are Kahoot, Nearpod, Word wall, and Book publishing platforms, as well as they are mentioned in a study (Ratinho & Martins, 2023). Furthermore, others are used for one or two teachers, such as ABCYa!, Lyrics Training, Fun brain, PBS Kids, Factile, Quizizz, Jeopardy, Minecraft Education, and Live worksheets; some apps were mentioned in another research (Azzouz, 2021), these applications feature game elements such as leader boards, levels, points, quests, badges, rewards, and cooperation.

Participants confirm that gamification develops and improves learners' English skills and subskills, the good retention when students learn new words while playing and using the apps, the increase in vocabulary when teachers present students with new English topics, as well as reviewing or put into practice the new words with the help of gamification. These findings are related to studies

(Thiagarajah et al., 2022; Lui, 2012), which they showed that students managed to enhance their vocabulary skills through gamification tools and that they find it easier to learn English vocabulary through games than direct instruction. Furthermore, some teachers added that with the help of gamification, students improve their input and output in language learning such as listening to and singing their favourite songs or reading online books through hearing the audio simultaneously. A study emphasizes that gamification improves oral language skills for language pronunciation training, positively affecting pronunciation learning (Athanasopoulos et al., 2018, cited in Gil-Aciron, 2022). Moreover, teachers indicate that gamification develops learners' writing and grammar. Students practice grammar when they work on structures from any English tense; for instance, they improve their writing when using grammar. Similar results are shown in this study, where gamification shows effects on EFL writing (Laffey, 2022).

Another fundamental results of using gamification for English language learning are the benefits. Studies presented by Barghani (2020) found that gamification increases motivation when playing, continuing quests, discovering secrets, and solving puzzles while students learn English. In addition, teachers highlight that students get motivated when using gamification for language learning; they show joy when getting points, showing status, and winning the game.

Lastly, this study's findings concern the impact of gamification on EFL learners through a good learning environment. A gamified learning environment enriches students' learning experience (Barghani, 2020). This corroborates Alomari et al.'s (2019) statements about gamification promoting the learning environment by creating a fun statement that encourages students by increasing their interest and motivation. Teachers argue that a good classroom environment exists; students show excitement, have a positive attitude, and collaborate with classmates.

Conclusions

Technology in education advancements can result an interactive, competitive, and dynamic atmosphere, which can be powered in the classroom using a gamification strategy. This research aimed to explore ELT Teachers' practices regarding the selection and implementation of gamification apps and platforms, and the impact of using gamification as a learning strategy in the EFL classroom. To respond to the search questions, the two instruments used were a questionnaire and a focus group, and three ELT teachers from a private institution participated in this research. The results prove that gamification might be implemented as strategy for students to learn English in

the English Foreign Language Classroom. Teachers shared the gamification apps and the online educational platforms they use to teach the language; furthermore, they added that they use them to make their classes and the learning process attractive and interactive. The results conclude that students develop English skills and subskills using gamification, such as vocabulary, listening, reading, writing, and grammar. Also, findings indicate that gamification in the EFL classroom is beneficial because students are motivated and become more technological. Finally, gamification creates a fun and exciting environment for students and the EFL classroom. This study shows that technology is currently taking advantage of ELT classrooms for learning and teaching English.

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Appendix 1 Questionnaire

1. How do you do to make your classes more attractive and interactive? Explain
2. What kind of Technology do you use in your English Classes?
a) Computer b) iPad c) Projector d) TV screen e) Other
3. Which gamification apps and online platforms do you use for your students learn English in the EFL classroom? Choose them.
a) Kahoot b) Nearpod c) ABCYa! d) Lyrics Training
e) Fun Brain f) PBS Kids g) Factile h) Word wall i) Quizizz
j) Other, which one(s)?
4. How has the use of gamification in your English classes helped your students to learn English?
5. Which English skills or subskills have your students improved after using gamification?
6. What are your students' reactions when using gamification?
7. What are the benefits of using gamification in the EFL classroom?
8. How will you describe your lesson after using a gamified lesson?

Appendix 2 Focus Group

1. How do your students respond to your daily English classes?
2. Why did you decide to use gamification for your English classes?
3. How long have you used gamification in your English classes?
4. Which gamification apps and online platforms do you use in the EFL classroom as ELT teacher?
5. How do you use gamification apps and online platforms in the EFL classroom?
6. How do your students react when using gamification?
7. What effects do gamification apps cause on your students in your English classes in the EFL classroom?
8. Why would you recommend English teachers to use gamification?
9. What suggestions would you give English teachers when using gamification apps and platforms for their English classes?