Gamification in English as Foreign Language Learning in Iraq: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract

Recently, there has been a significant rise in the implementation of gamification in education, specifically in language learning areas, as instructors strive to discover novel approaches that may increase student participation and engagement. The present study undertakes a comprehensive study of the diverse effects of gamification on academic achievement and learner motivation in the context of English language learning in Iraq. Gamification endeavors to design dynamic learning environments that engage students and promote their learning by incorporating gaming elements, including interactive board games and role-playing scenarios. Additionally, the research investigates the efficacy of gamified learning software in fostering ongoing student involvement and facilitating knowledge retention over an extended period. By employing a systematic review methodology, this study combines results from various educational resources, encompassing empirical studies, theoretical frameworks, and pedagogical methodologies. Through an examination of prior research concerning gamified EFL teaching methodologies, this study contributes to our understanding of the fundamental processes that foster increased motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes. The findings emphasize the impact that gamification can have on EFL classrooms. Nevertheless, the research emphasizes the significance of dealing with possible challenges, including the need to guarantee fair and equal access to gamified materials and the reduction of the likelihood of student discouragement. This study contributes to the existing knowledge on the efficacy of gamified EFL instruction. It highlights possible directions for future research and application within the domain of language education.

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Introduction

English is undeniably a crucial medium of international communication, providing access to information and facilitating individual development (Hamoud, 2020). Its significance in education and professional growth is underscored by its global prevalence as a medium of instruction (Adawiyah, 2022). However, mastering the complexities of learning the English language presents significant challenges, particularly refining linguistic abilities, which can hinder students' progress and diminish their drive (Xhemaili, 2022). The increasing decrease in levels of English proficiency highlights the critical nature of investigating novel pedagogical strategies, such as gamified learning, to tackle these enduring challenges (Adawiyah, 2022).

The evolution of pedagogical approaches in English language education has been influenced by the incorporation of entertainment and technology to enhance the learning experience Ellis et al. (2008). Gamification, which integrates interactive game elements into educational environments, has emerged as a potentially practical approach in this paradigm shift (Yossatorn et al., 2022). This adoption of gamified learning signifies an advance in addressing students' preferences for collaborative and interactive learning approaches, especially in light of their status as digital natives (Duarte, 2016).

Using gamification in education has been shown to positively impact student engagement and motivation (Prasetya, 2021). It provides opportunities for interactive and collaborative learning, aligning with the preferences of modern learners (Lucas, 2020). Furthermore, integrating digital technology has offered beneficial use in integrating language and content knowledge, enhancing the learning experience (Liu, 2020). Research has also highlighted the potential of game-based learning in teaching English to non-native speakers, recording significant success (Marlina, 2018). Additionally, the changing learning processes during the pandemic have emphasized the need to find appropriate approaches to online learning, further underscoring the relevance of innovative pedagogical strategies (Prasetya et al., 2022).

The impact of gamification technologies on cognition and learning processes has been supported by neurobiological research, demonstrating its impact on student engagement and learning outcomes (Liu, 2016). Furthermore, gamification techniques in teaching and learning exploratory courses have been found to enhance student motivation and create memorable learning experiences (Nurdillayeva & Zhuman, 2021). Through a review of the practical implementation of gamification in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction in Iraq, this study aims to shed light on its impact on student learning achievements and the language acquisition process as a whole. By conducting a comprehensive review of the current body of literature, this study aims to outline the diverse advantages and possible implementations of gamification in online learning to provide researchers and educators with valuable insights in Iraq.

What is gamification?

Gamification, a concept prevalent across various domains, gained prominence in the last decade, with the term itself emerging in 2008 and gaining widespread usage by 2010 (Sailer &

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Homner, 2019). Its roots trace back to the '80s, notably within children's software and educational game sectors (Dichev & Dicheva, 2017). Using game mechanics in non-game contexts to enhance user engagement and motivation spurred the development of gamification, particularly evident in educational settings (Kim & Castelli, 2021). This approach, akin to longstanding practices like business loyalty schemes and military rewards, incentivizes positive behavior (Rivera & Garden, 2021).

The surge in popularity of gamification in education, mainly catalyzed by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on online learning, has been well-documented. Gamification has been leveraged for decades in teaching various language acquisition topics through digital and non-digital games, offering an engaging and effective means of digital and non-digital games and engaging and effective instruction (Biçen & Kocakoyun, 2018). Educational games, categorized as severe or game-based learning, have been recognized as social engineering for educators, facilitating interactive and enjoyable language learning experiences (Biçen & Kocakoyun, 2018). The positive effects of integrating game elements into non-game environments on student motivation and cognition have been demonstrated in a 2020 systematic review (Khalil et al., 2018). Furthermore, games have been identified as practical tools for developing mental skills such as concentration and problem-solving, thereby enhancing real-life performance (Biçen & Kocakoyun, 2018). The immersive nature of games fosters a stress-free learning environment, promoting skill acquisition and complementing pedagogical approaches like the communicative method, which emphasizes interaction in language acquisition (Yaccob et al., 2022). Additionally, the universal appeal of games makes them accessible to individuals of all ages, nationalities, and genders, underscoring their potential as inclusive language learning resources.

Gamification in EFL Learning and Teaching

'Using gamification in language education aims to enhance students' motivation, engagement, and interaction with learning materials, which is particularly beneficial for school students who may find traditional tasks less attractive (Hansch, 2015). Gamification offers an enjoyable and practical approach to learning a second language, employing challenges through games, applications, or other systems to foster language acquisition. Exposure to digital games has been linked to improved vocabulary acquisition, with gamers often exhibiting more excellent proficiency in the target language than non-gamers (Govender & Arnedo-Moreno, 2021). Educational institutions have embraced gamification across various subjects to boost student achievement, using game components like points, levels, and challenges to enhance learning experiences. Platforms like Kahoot! Exemplify successful gamification implementations, offering interactive challenges facilitating learning and tracking progress (Kiyancicek, 2022).

Language learning through games encompasses a wide array of activities, ranging from board games to digital platforms like Busuu and Second Life (Govender & Arnedo-Moreno, 2021). These platforms provide immersive language practice and skill development environments, ultimately enhancing learning outcomes (Dehghanzadeh et al., 2019). Gamification extends beyond simply adding game elements to existing content; it involves creating inherently playable learning activities that promote engagement and motivation (Dichev, 2017). Integrating technology, including gamification, in language classrooms is increasingly recognized as essential for maintaining student motivation and promoting interactive learning

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(Nafis, 2020). Gamification strategies contribute to changing the classroom dynamic, fostering a goal-oriented and enjoyable learning environment that enhances intrinsic motivation among students (Michos, 2017; Zarzycka-Piskorz, 2015).

Language learning games employing gamification strategies improve information retention and foster motivation and task-oriented behavior among students (Kiyancicek, 2022). Digital platforms offer additional benefits, including increased motivation, meaningful learning experiences, and creating autotelic-conducive environments (Govender & Arnedo-Moreno, 2021). Research indicates that language games effectively motivate learners, particularly young learners, suggesting integrating games into formal education curricula and teacher training programs (Ali et al., 2020). Overall, gamification is promising for revolutionizing language education, offering engaging and effective learning experiences catering to diverse learning styles and preferences.

The Application of Gamified Learning in EFL Classroom

The demand for English proficiency in Iraq has prompted various approaches to simplify language learning for local students, with educators incorporating best practices globally. Gamification, applying game elements to educational settings, has gained popularity as an engaging learning method, particularly for subjects like grammar (Chambers & Yunus, 2017). This approach enhances student engagement, improving learning outcomes (Rafiq et al., 2019). Game-based learning is recognized for improving contextual understanding and cognitive achievements, fostering positive attitudes, and developing 21st-century skills (Rahmani, 2020).

Language learning through game-like approaches enhances student motivation, engagement, and learning quality (Poondej & Lerdpornkulrat, 2016). Gamification encourages active participation and enjoyment in learning, promoting students' confidence in using English (Maasum et al., 2015). Positive reinforcement, such as rewards, increases motivation and task completion (Anak Yunus & Hua, 2021). However, the credibility and fairness of reward systems are crucial for their effectiveness (Buckley et al., 2017). Studies also highlight the improvement in higher-order thinking skills with gamified learning (Bal, 2019).

Despite the benefits, digital gamified learning raises concerns about potential distractions and negative perceptions among students (Alyaz & Genc, 2016). Students' excessive use of mobile devices for non-educational games may detract from learning. Ensuring appropriate implementation of gamification and addressing technical issues are essential to maintaining student motivation (Mekler et al., 2017). Moreover, gamification design should offer a meaningful context for effective learning (Welbers et al., 2019). Educators must equip future ESL teachers with digital literacy and gamification skills to successfully navigate modern education systems (Desnenko et al., 2021).

Language gamification and learning theories

Language gamification often aligns with established learning theories, particularly in E-learning and M-learning. Mehdipour and Zerehkafi (2013) highlight the commonalities between these two forms of learning, emphasizing their reliance on course content, materials, and web-based resources. Within the framework of learning theories, educators' debate which theories should

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underpin E-learning and M-learning, with Behaviorism, Cognitivism, and Constructivism serving as foundational pillars. However, some educators explore non-conventional theories like Cognitive Flexibility and Situated Learning to design more effective instructional methods (Boyinbode, 2018). Notably, the gamification approach in language learning resonates with Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which combines intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to enhance user engagement and influence behavior toward learning.

SDT emphasizes individuals' engagement in activities driven by their basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Gamification provides an engaging platform for students to learn autonomously and collaboratively, fostering self-determination in completing tasks and immersing themselves in the language learning process (Tan, 2018). This approach encourages active participation and fosters active discussions among students, ultimately motivating them to grasp key language concepts (Rafiq et al., 2019; Pham, Nguyen, & Le, 2021). Thus, meaningful gamification acts as a catalyst for enhancing students' learning experiences and outcomes.

Gamification-Based Language Learning

Education is evolving beyond traditional institutions, offering learners numerous opportunities through emerging technologies. However, a significant challenge persists: making educational content more engaging. Gamification emerges as a popular solution, integrating game elements into non-game contexts to enhance enjoyment. By incorporating tactics from video games like points, leaderboards, challenges, rewards, and badges, gamification transforms mundane tasks like learning grammar and vocabulary into enjoyable experiences. Research demonstrates the efficacy of gamified systems in language learning, with recent studies providing design principles and highlighting the advantages of gamification in education (Hashim et al., 2019). Technology facilitates interactive and accessible learning, revolutionizing language acquisition. Tailoring game selection to specific skills, student demographics, classroom culture, and available technology optimize the gamified learning experience (Nah et al., 2013). Gamification strategies, including scoring systems and rewards, significantly boost task completion rates and student motivation (Brewer et al., 2013; Gibson et al., 2013). Systematic literature reviews suggest that gamified learning applications can effectively engage primary-grade students and enhance learning outcomes (Ishaq et al., 2021). Strategies such as providing frequent feedback, assessing progress, rewarding effort, and leveraging peer encouragement contribute to learner engagement (Raymer, 2011). As technology-based learning tools, online language games facilitate 21st-century learning and improve students' grammar and vocabulary acquisition (Hashim et al., 2019).

Gamification in education is a leading global trend characterized by its innovative use of technology to create engaging and meaningful learning experiences for students (Tan, 2018; Desnenko et al., 2021). By integrating game elements like quests, hints, challenges, levels, and rewards, gamification challenges students and heightens their competitive spirits (Kingsley & Grabner-Hagen, 2018). Activities with clear instructions and appealing elements motivate students positively, fostering active participation (Rafiq et al., 2019; Vargas-Macias et al., 2020). Notably, gamified learning supports student-centered approaches, empowering students as the focal point of their learning (Tsay et al., 2018; Hashim et al., 2019). Studies have identified

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standard gamification techniques, such as points, badges, and leaderboards, which stimulate competition and incentivize participation (Alomari et al., 2019; Antonaci, 2019). Points foster critical thinking and creativity, badges signify achievement, and leaderboards promote healthy competition and social comparison (Chow et al., 2011; Alomari et al., 2019). Feedback is essential for student progress, providing information and guidance to enhance learning outcomes (Antonaci et al., 2019; Welbers et al., 2019). However, thoughtful design considerations are crucial when incorporating gamification into language lessons, considering factors like user-centered design, challenge, personalization, and feedback (An, 2020; Naggar & Berkling, 2020). It's essential to select appropriate games or gamification strategies tailored to specific learning contexts and student needs (Buckley et al., 2017; Kijpoonpol & Phumchanin, 2018). While successful gamified learning environments can enhance student engagement, English competency, and cognitive achievements, ''evaluating each technique's suitability is vital before implementation (Hanus & Fox, 2015). Future research should focus on refining design aspects and developing guidelines for practical compelling gamified experiences (An, 2020).

Recent research in language gamification has shed light on its significant benefits for language learning. Bruder (2014) outlines several impacts of gamification in language acquisition, including increased enthusiasm, reduced disruptive behaviors, enhanced cognitive growth, improved maturity, and longer attention spans. Similarly, Müller, Reise, and Seliger (2015) highlight various advantages of gamification in language learning, such as experiential learning, increased engagement, improved focus, critical thinking, and enhanced participation. They further emphasize gamification's effectiveness, noting its adoption in European classrooms and its role in boosting student participation by leveraging game-like features. Perry (2014) observes game-like activities in assessing students' scores, replacing traditional assessment methods like tests and quizzes. In contrast, some researchers may remain indifferent to the benefits of gamification; its value in designing language games remains evident, transcending differences in opinion.

Motivation and engagement in language gamification

Integrating gamification into language learning begins with designing engaging and enjoyable lessons to attract and motivate students (Hashim et al., 2019; Mee et al., 2020). Motivation ensures effective and continuous English language learning (Boyinbode, 2018; Rafiq et al., 2019). Non-game activities in English classes often fail to motivate students, leading to the rise of gamified and technology-based learning approaches (Maasum et al., 2015). Studies have shown that gamified teaching styles effectively enhance students' understanding and retention of language concepts, such as phrasal verbs and vocabulary (Kijpoonpol & Phumchanin, 2018; Boyinbode, 2018). Games provide an immersive learning experience and positively impact students' motivation and participation in language tasks (Hashim et al., 2019; Bal, 2019). Components like points, badges, and scores serve as external rewards, stimulating students' desire to complete tasks and fostering positive attitudes toward learning (Antonaci et al., 2019; Anak Yunus & Hua, 2021). While extrinsic rewards can enhance motivation, educators must carefully balance them with other strategies to sustain students' enthusiasm for learning (An, 2020). The novelty of gamified learning lies in its ability to capture students' attention, ignite excitement for learning, and maintain prolonged engagement (Mee et al., 2020).

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Incorporating gamification into language learning fosters social interaction and collaboration among students, essential skills for holistic development (An, 2020). Games enhance engagement and interaction, improve learning outcomes, and reduce student stress levels (Alomari et al., 2019; Rahmani, 2020). Studies have shown that gamification increases engagement, positive influence, and student collaboration, leading to more efficient assessments and reduced costs (Tenorio et al., 2016). The competitive nature of gamified learning promotes engagement and challenges students to excel fostering teamwork and critical thinking skills (Buckley et al., 2017; Rafiq et al., 2019). However, balancing competition carefully is crucial, as it can positively and negatively affect students' motivation and satisfaction (Hanus & Fox, 2015). Constructive competition can enhance enjoyment and positive relationships, while destructive competition may lead to demotivation (An, 2020). ESL teachers play a crucial role in creating a supportive environment that encourages students to learn from failures and take risks (An, 2020; Mee et al., 2020). While gamified learning is generally well-received by students and seen as an effective supplement to traditional teaching methods, it should be integrated thoughtfully to maximize its benefits (Adris & Yamat, 2015; Anak Yunus & Hua, 2021). Overall, gamification holds promise as a solution to creating more engaging and meaningful language learning environments (Rahmani, 2020).

Practical gamification in EFL classroom

There is a growing interest in incorporating gamification into language learning curriculums. Gamification shows promise in increasing student engagement retention and reducing dropout rates (Yaccob et al., 2022). Game-based methods have effectively overcome language learning obstacles by focusing on vocabulary, communication, and writing skills and promoting collaboration among students of similar proficiency levels (Yaccob et al., 2022). These methods include interactive features like nudging keys to prompt student actions and scaffolding exercises to build skills and confidence build skills and confidence gradually gradually. Moreover, project-based gamification lessons encourage students to apply learned concepts to real-world scenarios, fostering deeper learning and retention. By making learning enjoyable and interactive, gamification enhances student motivation and engagement (Dichev, 2020). Teachers often use games, word games, and interactive tests to make learning concepts more accessible and fun, particularly in ESL classes (Yaccob et al., 2022). However, 'educators must design gamified experiences that consider social, cultural, and physical factors to ensure inclusive participation (Hansch, 2015). While gamification holds promise for improving learning outcomes, there's a need for further empirical research and best practices for its practical design and implementation, particularly in developing countries (Seaborn & Fels, 2014). Overall, gamification offers a valuable approach to language learning that aligns with students' digital-native culture and enhances their learning.

Language gamification involves several processes that require careful consideration to ensure the effectiveness of the end product. Educational games designed for language learning should possess specific characteristics to reinforce content knowledge and engage students effectively. Bruder (2014) outlines the critical features of educational games, including continuous challenges, an interesting andexciting storyline, flexibility, immediate and valuable rewards, and a balance of fun and realism. Smith (2014) emphasizes the importance of setting

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clear goals, incorporating obstacles of varying difficulty levels, and promoting collaboration or healthy competition among students. Lazarro (2004) introduces psychological elements essential for educational games, such as providing hard fun to create a sense of accomplishment, offering easy fun to attract players, catering to different emotional states at various difficulty levels, and incorporating elements of competition or collaboration among players. These characteristics form the basis for designing effective language games, ensuring their validity and reliability. Integrating emotions into game design, as suggested by Lazarro (2004), adds depth and variety to the gaming experience, preventing monotony. By leveraging these traits, educators can develop frameworks for language games that enhance learning outcomes and engage students more effectively.

Müller, Reise, and Seliger (2015) present seven steps for designing a language game, emphasizing the importance of thorough preparation and understanding of player needs. The first step, "love," underscores the necessity for developers, typically educators, to be passionate about the game's design to ensure its success. The subsequent step, "elaborate strategy and get ready," involves acquiring extensive knowledge and investigating student needs. In the third step, "Visualize the Why, What, and Who," developers must comprehend the players' requirements and identify the desired learning experiences. Step four, "exploring a new world," entails creatively designing themes and storyboards to enhance the game's appeal. "Leveling up the mechanics," the fifth step, involves integrating gaming features like icons, avatars, badges, and scoring boards to motivate players and convey game objectives effectively. Step six, "upgrade the graphics," focuses on enhancing the game's visual appeal to capture players' interest. Lastly, "repeated play tests" in step seven involve thorough testing and refinement to ensure the game's validity and reliability. These steps are flexible and can be adapted interchangeably, with developers encouraged to explore additional research for further refinement in language game design.

Challenges of implementing language gamification

Educators face various challenges in implementing language gamification in the EFL classroom. The COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated a shift to online learning, presenting challenges for English language learners (Mahyoob, 2020). Additionally, the incorporation of gamification elements such as feedback, points, and rewards in EFL/ESL instruction has been identified, highlighting the need for effective implementation strategies (Zhang & Hasim, 2023). Vietnamese EFL learners have shown a strong preference for gamification in the form of online language games, indicating potential receptiveness to gamified learning approaches (Phuong, 2020). Furthermore, challenges related to communicative language teaching, classroom management, and the incorporation of local languages in the EFL classroom have been identified, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of the obstacles faced by EFL educators (Daba et al., 2022; Hoa & Tung, 2023; Khairunnisa & Lukmana, 2020). Moreover, the readiness of EFL learners, the design of gamified classes, and the factors affecting the implementation of communicative language teaching have been explored, providing insights into the complexities of integrating gamification and communicative approaches in the EFL context ("Gamifying Flipped Writing Classes for EFL Students: A Class Design Model"," 2022; Chang & Goswami, 2011).

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Additionally, the positive attitudes of Indonesian EFL teachers towards translanguaging and the analysis of classroom interaction in EFL-speaking classes underscore the importance of understanding teacher perspectives and classroom dynamics in implementing innovative approaches (Afriadi, 2021; Elismawati, 2018). In summary, the challenges of implementing language gamification in the EFL classroom are multifaceted, encompassing technological shifts, pedagogical strategies, learner readiness, and teacher perspectives. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive understanding of the EFL context, effective instructional design, and the alignment of gamification with language learning objectives.

Conclusion

Gamification in education, employing game design elements to motivate learners, holds significant potential for enhancing motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes, particularly in language learning across diverse skill levels and age groups. Language instructors can integrate game elements like competition and rewards into their teaching methodologies and curriculums, tailoring them to desired outcomes. While game-based learning has gained attention recently, it remains essential to explore its effectiveness comprehensively, especially in language education for various learner groups, including those with special needs. Further research is warranted to explore gamification's implications and possibilities, particularly in mobile language learning and primary education settings. Despite some praise and criticism surrounding gamified learning, it offers promising avenues for engaging students and promoting active learning. Past studies highlight the positive impact of gamification in ESL classrooms, fostering competitiveness, incentives, and student engagement. However, creating a safe and conducive learning environment is crucial to prevent demotivation. Language educators should receive support to design and implement practical gamified language lessons, contributing to the broader understanding and application of gamification in ESL teaching. As the language education landscape evolves with advancing technologies, educators must embrace innovative strategies like language gamification to cater to the needs of today's resourceful and adaptive learners, fostering a dynamic and engaging learning environment.

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