Gamification in Language Education

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Key Points

- A brief overview of gamification in language education
- The pedagogical impact of gamification in language learning and teaching
- Challenges of gamification in language education
- Practical guidance in applying gamification in the language classroom

Glossary

Gamification The application of game elements and principles in non-game contexts, such as learning, in order to increase learners' motivation and engagement.
Game elements The components, features, or characteristics of a game.
Game-based learning A learning environment involving the use of games.

Abstract

Recent years have seen an increased interest in the concept of gamification for its potential to enhance motivation and engagement in the language learning process. This entry describes what gamification entails, reviews empirical research on its impact and reports on practitioners' pedagogical uses. We conclude with a number of challenges surrounding the use of gamification in language education.

Introduction

Digital technologies have long been looked at for their various affordances to support language learning and teaching, in particular to increase interest and motivation and to facilitate learning outside of the classroom (Wattana, 2013; Whitton, 2010). They do this, amongst others, by providing immersive environments (Gee & Gao, 2022) that simulate real-world language contexts (Gerhard et al., 2004); promoting forms of interaction beneficial for language acquisition (Peterson, 2012); facilitating social interaction (Thorne, 2008); allowing learners to collaborate with peers as well as target language speakers; and practicing conversational skills in a supportive environment (Zheng et al., 2009). The use of digital games has emerged as an influential area of research in computer-assisted language learning (CALL) (Peterson et al., 2020) and has been integrated into language education in many different contexts (Reinders, 2012). However, arguably more common is the use of game-like elements in language instruction, using a range of techniques and features that borrow from those used in digital games without involving direct game play. This "gamification" has had a remarkable influence on educational practices, particularly also in language learning and teaching. In the next section we unpack its background, definitions and the ways gamification has been operationalized.

From Game to Gamification

The terms game, game-based learning, and gamification are all extensively used and related to one another as they all involve forms of play. In order to understand the concept of gamification, it is helpful to give a brief overview of key terms that are central to this article, as well as the connection between them.

According to Wright et al., a game is "an activity which is entertaining, engaging, and challenging, and an activity in which the learners play and usually interact with others." (2006, p. 1). Hadfield (1990, p. v) describes a game as "an activity with rules, a goal, and an element of fun." This means a game is a form of play that includes a clear objective, defined rules, interactive elements, competition, and an enjoyable component, which can be leveraged to create an effective language learning environment. A number of educators have argued that games serve as effective tools for creating contexts that make language learning meaningful and enjoyable (Wright et al., 2006). Games could also offer learners valuable opportunities to practice language skills (Gapasin & Bautista, 2022), communicate in class (Liu et al., 2021), develop vocabulary (Huyen & Nga, 2003), and actively participate in learning activities (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2009), to name a few. "If it is accepted that games can provide intense and meaningful practice of language, then they must be regarded as central to a language teacher's repertoire and not merely a way of passing the time" (Wright et al., 2006, p. 2). This viewpoint underscores the importance of integrating games as a fundamental aspect of language learning and teaching, rather than considering them as mere supplementary activities.

As gaming has gained popularity, the incorporation of games into the language classroom has also become widespread globally. In particular, the use of games as part of the learning process, known as game-based learning, has been used as a pedagogical strategy for many decades and in recent years has been subject to an increased amount of educational research (deHaan, 2011). This has revealed its significant impact on language acquisition (Dixon et al., 2022), its potential to lower affective barriers (Gee, 2012), encourage target language production (Vosburg, 2017), and enhance willingness to communicate in the target language (Reinders & Wattana, 2015). The terms game-based learning and gamification are often used interchangeably in language education and existing CALL research. Generally, they are related concepts but not exactly the same. While they both aim to increase learners' engagement and motivation during learning processes, gamification involves integrating game elements into non-game contexts, such as learning activities, to make them more engaging. When used in language education, gamification involves incorporating such game elements as rules, goals, point systems, leaderboards, badges, challenges, interaction, fun, play, and competition, all used as part of regular learning activities. In fact, many language teachers naturally include such elements into their classrooms, for example when they use quizzes that allow their learners to win a reward or a small prize. However, gamification goes beyond merely rewarding learners, aiming to naturally engage and motivate learners. It should be noted that gamification of course does not necessitate the use of technology. Regardless, the crucial aspect is to prioritize learning, particularly language learning, while leveraging the benefits offered by game elements.

What are the Benefits?

Gamification, whether involving technology or not, has been considered as one of the most prominent teaching methods used to increase learner motivation (Jackson & McNamara, 2013). By incorporating game elements, especially fun, play, competition, into language activities within gamified learning, gamification has been shown to be able to enhance learners' intrinsic motivation (Li et al., 2024), as it renders learning experiences enjoyable and fulfilling (Koivisto & Hamari, 2019). Increased motivation has been linked with increased interest in learning the language (Wu & Huang, 2017) and a willingness to engage in learning activities outside of the classroom (Scholz, 2022), which in turn may lead to increased learner autonomy (Pham et al., 2021).

Game elements are normally used to engage language learners with the content and to progress toward a goal (Dehghanzadeh et al., 2021). A reward system, for example, can lead to learners spending more time working on a task and, in turn, improving academic performance (Wichadee & Pattanapichet, 2018) if they get rewards for completing a task correctly. Also, game elements, such as challenge, competition, levels, badges, and rewards, have the ability to transform effort into concrete rewards, a factor that many learners find highly motivating. All of this, consequently, increases their engagement in the learning process (Ho, 2020) and encourages them to set goals and monitor their progress, while enjoying the excitement of competition and a sense of accomplishment, as they progress through levels, overcome challenges, and receive immediate feedback and recognition for their efforts. In addition, integrating instant feedback mechanisms, like points or leaderboards, for correct responses aids learners in understanding their progress, motivating them to strive for improvement and demonstrating increased engagement in the overall lesson.

Previous studies have explored various aspects of gamification, investigating its implementation in language education and thus shedding light on the application of gamification in language classrooms and its impact on language learning. Ružić and Dumančić (2015), for example, examined the impact of gamification on vocabulary acquisition through the creation of a vocabulary learning application with game-like features. This gamified application incorporated quizzes, challenges, and progress monitoring. The findings revealed that language learners utilizing the gamified application demonstrated superior performance in vocabulary retention and recall compared to those employing conventional methods. The adoption of a game-based approach fostered an interactive and immersive learning setting, thus facilitating memory retention and more effective vocabulary learning. Gamification has also proven effective in fostering speaking skills in language classrooms. For instance, Thorne et al. (2012) investigated the incorporation of gamified online language exchanges into language courses. They implemented an online gaming environment where learners interacted with native speakers and participated in language exchange tasks. This gamified language exchange platform was found to

enhance learners' speaking proficiency, intercultural communication, and meaningful interactions with native speakers. These findings are consistent with those of Murray and Fujishima (2013) who found that gamification through virtual language exchange platforms helped language learners improve not only intercultural communication but also their active participation in gamified conversations and cultural challenges, gaining valuable insights into diverse cultures.

Problems and Difficulties: What to Consider?

Despite its potential, the effective implementation of gamification in language education is contingent on a number of factors. Key of these is the careful consideration of pedagogical principles and learner preferences. Firstly, teachers must consider when to integrate game elements into their language classrooms and for what purpose. This is to ensure that gamified activities align with educational objectives and promote meaningful learning experiences designed to sustain learners' enjoyment and motivation. While certain learners may be greatly motivated by points or rewards, others may exhibit less enthusiasm. Therefore, it is imperative for teachers to ensure the inclusion of all learners in gamified learning activities, just as they would with other aspects of learning and teaching.

Secondly, when gamification is not applied carefully, it may be ineffective at enhancing learners' intrinsic motivation and even be detrimental to learners' wellbeing and learning outcomes (Jones et al., 2023; Mekler et al., 2017). For example, leaderboards and badges can lead to an overly competitive environment, reducing collaboration and increasing anxiety. It is thus important to select games that allow learners to track their own progress, rather than emphasizing comparisons with others, and to balance competitive elements with cooperative activities where learners work together toward common goals.

Additionally, given that not all learners enjoy games, it is crucial for teachers to be mindful about when and how to implement gamification to accommodate their learners. Teachers should know how to determine the types of game elements utilized, as well as the optimal occasions for integrating gamification. They may opt to introduce gamified activities at the beginning of lessons to foster student motivation or incorporate them during language practice sessions to sustain engagement, particularly if learners encounter challenges in maintaining interest in learning the language. Furthermore, in large language classes, there is typically a range of learners with varied backgrounds, learning approaches, and language proficiency levels. In integrating gamification, teachers should account for these differing needs and preferences, aiming to provide activities that accommodate various learning styles and levels of proficiency.

Conclusion

Gamification offers a range of potentially beneficial pedagogical strategies teachers can employ to increase motivation and support language learning. These benefits need to be weighed against the possible drawbacks and the integration of gamification elements requires careful planning. With new technologies increasing the range of tools available to both teachers and learners to gamify the language learning process, we are sure to see interesting new developments in coming years. For future research directions, more research is needed, however, on how teachers integrate gamification, the barriers they experience, and the role professional development can play in better preparing teachers for adopting new practices in pedagogically sound ways. Similarly, we need to better understand learners' preferences and how different forms of gamification both positively and negatively affect them.

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