

Gamified English Language Learning in Ukraine: Critical Divide between Tradition and Innovation

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Abstract

The article aims to describe gamification and educational technologies integrated into English teacher education as impactful and novel practices in Ukraine. Therefore the study briefly reviews educational technologies and gamification research and presents empirical evidence from Kyiv National Linguistic University. Since Ukraine is determined to be in line with the world's progressive tendencies and is striving for digital humanistic pedagogy, the significance of this study lies in proving that technology-assisted gamified English learning essentially transforms Ukrainian education and positively affects Ukrainian schools where the quality of English is on the agenda. The study's central question addresses the benefits of gamified learning for building English proficiency in preservice teachers and developing necessary teacher competencies, projecting the effect on their in-service teaching at Ukrainian schools in the future. Collecting the data and carrying out the research employed mixed methods, engaging 43 future teachers of English in the 1st and 2nd years of training and 11 language instructors. The findings prove that the study is relevant and deserves further investigation for a successful application in English teacher preparation in Ukraine to make school classrooms motivating and engaging for enhancing English language education and reaching ambitious goals to meet the world's standards in teacher training.

Keywords: Educational technology in Ukraine, English teacher education, gamification, gamified English language learning, Moodle

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Introduction

In the epoch of digital technologies, foreign language teacher education worldwide faces rapidly changing teaching trends. Students, “labeled as digital natives” (Rahmani, 2020, p. 33), having been growing with technology since birth, lose interest in traditional resources and methods of teaching English, considering them dull and out-of-date, which increases unmotivated and slow-to-progress students (Mehrotra, 2019). To fulfill their learning potential, educators should develop new “strategies of cognition” (Semerikov et al., 2021, p. 42), updating teacher education programs and methodologies.

It is not a secret that many novice teachers employ strategies of university language instruction in their school classrooms as reliable, supposedly perpetuating tradition or promoting innovation. Today’s Ukrainian classroom is becoming increasingly technology-aware and attached to using apps and e-platforms in everyday life (communication with peers, entertainment, etc.); thus, adapting technologies for learning as appealing and beneficial has come to the attention of language educators.

Despite multiple challenges, a growing tendency to reevaluate the role of technology in learning is apparent in Ukraine. The COVID-19 pandemic questioned traditional education sustainability and urged immediate transformations. According to Bykov & Leshchenko (2016), preconditioned by Ukrainian teachers’ insufficient technology literacy and implementation and under the pressure of the pandemic, Ukrainian education experienced “a crash course immersion” (Matviienko et al., 2021, p. 137) into technology integration (Ihnatova et al., 2021; Lazarenko & Ihnatova, 2022; Matviienko & Kuzmina, 2020; Semerikov et al., 2021; Spirin et al., 2021). The war in Ukraine began on February 24, 2022, and added dramatic vigor to the further exploration of ETs for resuming and continuing educational services (Galynska & Bilous, 2022; Tverdokhlebova & Yevtushenko, 2023).

However, changes in English language education in Ukraine stem largely from global developments. Affected by the worldwide aspirations toward “digital humanistic education” and for creating a “positively integrated reality” (Bykov & Leshchenko, 2016, p. 1), grammar rules and principles of foreign language structure taught while playing a game in an encouraging classroom seem to comply fully with them (Dichev & Dicheva, 2017; Humeniuk, 2023; Mehrotra, 2019; Myers, 2019; Pandey, 2019; Rahmani, 2020; Rojas et al., 2021).

The study intends to describe and analyze the benefits of technology-assisted gamified English learning in teacher training with the perspective of the practical application of the acquired expertise in Ukrainian schools. Resonating with the main aim of the study, related objectives are as follows: a). to identify the benefits of building language proficiency, b). to identify the effect of gamified learning on developing necessary teacher competencies, c). to explore students and teachers attitudes towards gamified learning.

Literature Review

Educational Technologies for Transformation and “Pedagogical Reality”

Since education is the vanguard of change, we expect it to pioneer adopting innovative technologies for its services and equip with the knowledge to operate them, significantly promoting further innovation in scientific and social domains. The role of ETs “in increasing the positive potential of cognitive field” (Bykov & Leschenko, 2016, p. 2) and in enriching and diversifying teaching methods is decisive (Humeniuk, 2023; Ihnatova et al., 2021; Koval & Avramchuk, 2016; Lazarenko & Ihnatova, 2022; Matviienko & Kuzmina, 2020; Semerikov et al., 2021; Spirin et al., 2021; Weisberg & Dawson, 2023). ETs integrated into most higher education institutions in Ukraine “ensure the modernization of the educational process” (Semerikov et al., 2021, p. 38). Teaching and learning with ETs enable education in both material and virtual reality, transcending physical boundaries (Bykov & Leshchenko, 2016; Cenejac, 2014). Bykov and Leshchenko (2016) introduced the term “pedagogical reality,” identifying its nature (p. 6) as overlapping “real and virtual spaces,” creating “conditions for spiritual and creative development of teachers and students.” In such a “pedagogical reality,” teachers and students collaborate, utilizing various electronic means, such as PowerPoint, social media, e-learning platforms, e-networks, blogs, and websites, which encourage student engagement and intensify cognitive activity, wherein positive emotions go hand in hand with learning hard in the classroom. (Bykov & Leshchenko, 2016; Semerikov et al., 2021).

All appearance, time-tested traditional teaching methods under the influence of ubiquitous technologies adjust to “pedagogical reality” to bridge the divide between tradition and innovation. In the long run, the new Ukrainian “pedagogical reality,” with its augmented focus on technology application, will lead to a critical departure from habit in educational services. The versatility and popularity of ETs persuade us that a further boost in technology for learning is inevitable, resulting in new emerging technologies (Cenejac, 2014; Hernandez, 2021; Humeniuk, 2023).

Gamification as Part of Emerging Educational Technology

Gamification employs game elements for better participants’ involvement in many fields of life; education is no exception. Lee and Hammer addressed the “gamification of education” (p. 1) as a remarkable phenomenon for motivation and engagement (Kim et al., 2009; Lee & Hammer, 2011). Other scholars defined games as a “product of technology” for learning, simulating reality to change education (Dichev & Dicheva, 2017; Kapp, 2017; Kim et al., 2009; Koster, 2004; Lazzaro, 2004; Rahmani, 2020). Humeniuk (2023) states that “gamification is impossible without technology” (p. 127), and Hernandez (2021) claims gamification is “an emerging technology” itself. The positive effects of gamification on cognitive, emotional, and social levels coincide with the results of ETs on learners on the same levels (Lee & Hammer, 2011). Gamification effectively works in the “tech-savvy” or “digital natives” classrooms familiar to them and is a friendly tool while teaching “technophile” students (Cenejac, 2014; Humeniuk, 2023; Kim et al., 2009; Rahmani, 2020; Rojas et al., 2021; Yanes & Bououd, 2019). Whereas Mehrotra (2019) focused on

the benefits of gamification technology for students, Myers (2019) explained how the evolution of gamification affected language teachers, eventually reaching maturity in language instruction (Pandey, 2019).

Gamification Design Principles, Elements for Advantages in English Learning

Considering gamification in English language education as applying the characteristics of games, there is an evident association with playing specific roles in a “non-game context” (Dichev & Dicheva, 2017; Kapp, 2017; Rahmani, 2020; Yanes & Bououd, 2019; Whybrow, 2015). The core principles in game design, such as *engagement, challenge, progression, and accomplishment*, integrate well into successful English classroom instructional design (Whybrow, 2015). The same principles also dictate the rules for effective technology-assisted gamified English learning (Lee & Hammer, 2011; Kapp, 2017; Whybrow, 2015). According to Lee and Hammer (2011), gamification design “employs game mechanics, dynamics, and frameworks to encourage the desired behavior of individuals” (p. 4). Judging by the experience of practicing teachers of English, *engagement, challenge, progression, and accomplishment* correspond to the intent of students and teachers of English to succeed and mingle with interactive fun and enjoyment, inspiring to improve the knowledge. Preparing students for real-life challenges and problem solutions through play elements essentially “reshapes the landscape” of English language learning (Cinejac, 2014; Dichev & Dicheva, 2017; Lee & Hammer, 2011; Rojas et al., 2021). In compliance with a game strategy where the player is a focal figure, the student-centered approach in language education has much in common (Pandey, 2019; Whybrow, 2015). Additionally, positive behavior, greater engagement, enjoyable experiences, and competition are expected and desirable outcomes, and typical gameplay elements (e.g., point scoring, competition, rules of play) grant them (Mehrotra, 2019; Yanes & Bououd, 2019).

Identifying the “game mechanics” constituents, challenges corresponding to the learning goals, an impact on learning style, a gain of language proficiency, and instant feedback ensure them and create a platform for experimenting with rules, emotions, and social roles during lessons (Humeniuk, 2023; Kapp, 2017; Pandey, 2019; Stott & Neustaedter, 2016; Whybrow, 2015; Yaccob et al., 2022).

As gamification helps students build a sense of local community and become part of a global community, the prestige of foreign language knowledge is evident (Cenejac, 2014; Rahmani, 2020).

While Myers (2019) is confident in the teacher’s growing creativity and collaboration with students during gamified teaching, Mehrotra (2019) warns that gamification should not turn education into a game in class but interweave game dynamics with hard work and a steady focus on education.

Method

The mixed methods research intends to study the impact of gamified learning on the English proficiency of future teachers. Constructing preservice teachers' professional preparation is one of the challenging tasks of English teacher education because it implies acquiring knowledge of the language and learning how to pass it on to future students. Along with the main aim of the research to describe gamified English learning as cross-cutting and beneficial for proficiency in writing and speaking, the authors also address communicative, creative, critical thinking, and collaborative skills development as necessary teacher competencies. The anonymous survey provided data for qualitative and quantitative analysis.

Participants

The research was performed in the Germanic Philology Department at the English Phonetics and English Practice Chair at Kyiv National Linguistic University (KNLU) in the fall semester of the 2022-2023 academic year. The research engaged a sample group of 43 students – intending teachers of English in the 1st and 2nd year of study, majoring in “Philology” and “Secondary Education.” All enrolled in the class “Practical Course of Speaking and Writing English.” Eleven language instructors teaching these students English joined the experiment voluntarily.

Research Instruments

Aligning with the university syllabus and instructional design, students worked on the program thematical material: “The Geographical Situation of Great Britain” (1st year) and “Choosing a Career” (2nd year) in the “Practical Course of Speaking and Writing English” class. The authors agreed on not transcending the boundaries of the usual classroom environment - scheduled classes, without allocating additional time for meetings to avoid student stress.

Moodle became the platform for work for several reasons: it contains gamified learning elements: points, badges, opportunities for analytics, and competition. The platform sustains engagement through multiple operational features to optimize collaborative learning (Koval & Avramchuk, 2016). The survey completed the experiment. Teachers shared their experiences and views verbally. Students answered the following questions in writing.

- Do you feel more motivated when using ETsand gamified learning?
- Do you consider gamified tasks and Moodle effective for learning new vocabulary?
- Do gamified tasks help improve communication skills?
- Do you find Moodle and gamification effective for learning information and broadening your outlook?
- Are they advantageous for developing creative and critical skills?
- Is it beneficial for your writing skills improvement?
- Will you apply gamified learning in your classroom?
- Are you aware of gamification risks?

Moodle's technical characteristics enabled recording class activities and reflecting on them

afterward.

Research Procedures

We organized the research into three stages. In the first preparatory stage, we discussed and agreed on design, technology, content, and gamified learning elements. The design comprised A- and B-Level activities with specific objectives, content focus, gamification elements, and expected outcomes. The A-Level tasks accommodated multiple choice, filling in gaps, true or false, matching word exercises, and work on online texts and dictionaries for vocabulary build-up. The prevailing asynchronous format on the A-Level allowed more independence on Moodle. The B-Level tasks addressed speaking and writing skills based on the vocabulary of level A. Brainstorming, mind-mapping, digital story plots, role-playing, team presentations and projects, and essay writing engaged synchronously more. Table one shows the instructional design exercised on Moodle.

Table 1. *Instructional design of gamified language learning on Moodle*

Activity	Objectives	Types of Assignments	Gamification Elements for Motivation	Format of Work	Expected Outcomes
A-Level	Thematical Vocabulary Extension.	Work on e-texts and dictionaries. Doing multiple-choice, filling in gaps, matching words exercises. True or false statements exercises.	Competition for better grades and scores. Display of analytics on leaderboards	Synchronous & asynchronous (prevailing).	Correct use of thematical vocabulary in written and oral exercises. Good results in vocabulary tests.
B-Level	Development of Writing and Speaking Skills on the Studied Topics. Use of Thematical Vocabulary in the Assignments.	Brainstorming, mind-mapping, developing plots for digital stories, role plays, dramatization, chats, forums, projects, participation, essays/letters writing.	Team competition for better project presentation. Awards for best letter/essay writing, storytelling. Assigning nominations for participation in role-plays, dramatization. Recognition for chats and forums participation.	Synchronous (prevailing)& asynchronous.	Evident progress in developing speaking and writing skills in the B-Level activities. Confident, fluent, and accurate presentation of the program material in projects. Accuracy of written works, resulting in high scores.

In the second stage, we implemented the instructional design of gamified learning on Moodle in the class “Practical Course of Speaking and Writing English.” Completing the second stage required incorporating lower-order thinking skills on the A-level, such as remembering, understanding, summarizing, and progressing to higher-order thinking skills on the B-level: planning, composing, creating, and critically assessing the results. Both stages incorporated gamification elements: team and individual competition, scoring/grading, leaderboard analytics, assigning awards, and signs of recognition for best performance with synchronous and asynchronous work formats.

The third stage was surveying and analyzing students’ and instructors’ opinions.

Findings

Judging by research results, students in the 1st and 2nd year of study positively assess gamified learning on Moodle and consider it innovation and investment in their professionalism.

The percentage discrepancy between the 1st and 2nd-year students' perceptions is insignificant. Although the 2nd year students acknowledge the benefits of gamification more, which is explicable: they are more confident in English learning and better aware of the importance of new methodologies and techniques in teaching English. The survey shows that 83% to 88% of students feel motivated to study when using gamification and ETs, 83% to 94% consider gamification on Moodle effective for learning new vocabulary, 72% to 75% think they improve their communication skills, 72% to 100% find Moodle effective for learning information and broadening their mind, 78% to 99% developed their creative skills and logical thinking, 86% to 89% improved their writing skills, from 85% to 100% improved speaking. Judging by the feedback, students developed positive attitudes toward employing gamification and ETs in their future work (from 90,4% to 100%).

However, most respondents are unaware of gamification risks hidden well behind fun in the classrooms (the percentage of risk awareness is 5% to 10% between 1st and 2nd year).

According to the instructors’ opinions, they are more critical of students’ achievement in speaking skills (75%) but unanimously approve of effectiveness for learning vocabulary (100%) and creativity (100%). Instructors’ commitment to using gamification ETs is justified, and their understanding of risks is clear (100%). The survey results prove the effectiveness of using gamified tasks on LMS Moodle to develop a good command of English and professional competencies and dispositions (Figure one).

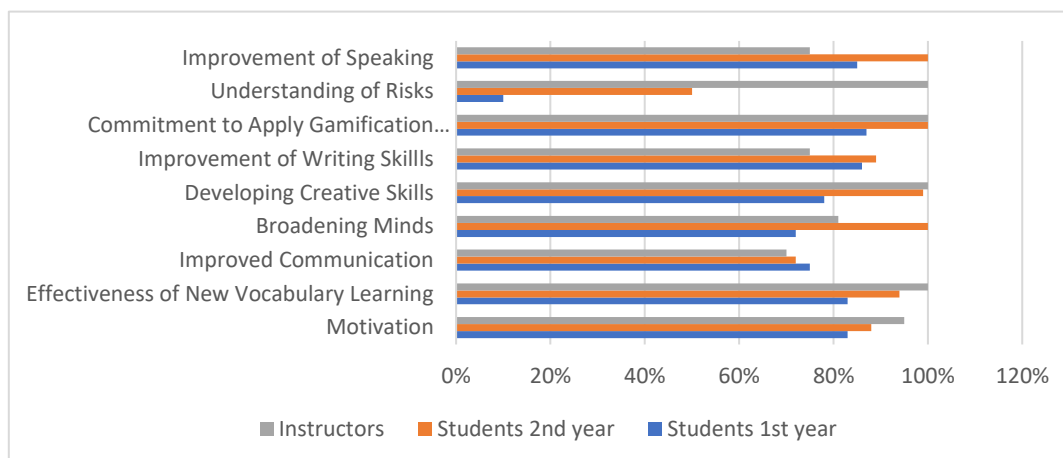


Figure 1. The effects of gamified English learning on Moodle

Students in their majority applied the words “pleasant,” “fun,” “exciting,” and “cool,” characterizing the emotional effect and the well-traceable positivity in describing learning as “productive,” “developing,” “motivating,” and “encouraging.” The students identified *motivation, competition, social engagement, and training problem-solving and critical thinking skills* as the advantageous elements of gamified English learning; engaged in the research showed better performance and attendance results.

From the instructor’s standing, gamified learning and ETs improve monitoring and assessment, student interaction for collaboration and feedback, flexibility in creating and adjusting course content, and instruction time management.

Discussion

Speaking about ETs as leverage for the modernization of education in Ukraine (Semerikov et al., 2021), it is evident that innovation confidently fights its way into education, specifically in English language learning. By its mission to connect the country to the rest of the world, the English language also serves as a medium for putting to practice the world’s best experiences. The humanization of education through gamified learning evinces the profound sensitivity of Ukrainian education to the educational orientations in other countries.

Intended to persuade that gamified English learning is potent and well-fitting in Ukraine's digital humanistic pedagogy framework, the research sustains the idea that the primary goal of gamification and technology for English language education to encourage positive attitudes to and greater engagement in language study, competition, collaboration, creativity, and pleasurable impressions, is justified and worth toiling on in teacher training as yielding good outcomes (Humeniuk, 2023; Rojas et al., 2021; Weisberg & Dawson, 2023; Whybrow, 2015; Yaccob et al., 2022). Gamification elements affect learners on the cognitive level, motivating the learners to develop their skills; emotional level, arousing a range of powerful positive emotions; social level,

providing a sense of community and improving communication skills (Dichev & Dicheva, 2017; Lee & Hammer, 2011; Rahmani, 2020). Educational technologies allow versatile work formats, which change Ukrainian schools consistently, deepening the divide from tradition (Ihnatova et al., 2021; Lazarenko & Ihnatova, 2022; Matviienko & Kuzmina, 2020). The interest in technology-assisted education, fueled by the digital awareness of modern students, reconditioned their positive attitudes toward gamified learning because of many advantages for English proficiency and developing the necessary competencies to be efficient educators (Rahmani, 2020; Rojas et al., 2021; Weisberg & Dawson, 2023; Yaccob et al., 2022).

In accord with the ideas mentioned above, the study results underscored first, Ukrainian students' and instructors' preparedness and desire to embrace novelty; second, they proved the non-fading topicality of the authoritative research completed years ago, revealing adequate response to and further investigation of technology-assisted gamified English learning in recent publications.

However, along with the benefits of gamified learning, Lee & Hammer (2011) highlight some risks: gamification might absorb teacher resources or teach students to learn only when provided rewards; shifting to more fun than necessary is always a temptation. Regarding the avoidance of risks, the application of gamification requires more thorough planning and selecting classroom management strategies. Last, the teacher is challenged to keep the status of the pivotal teaching figure in the classroom with such powerful competitors as gamification technologies.

Conclusion

Keeping in mind that the main aim of the research is to address gamification and technology integration as a meaningful experience in English teacher preparation, the authors conclude that gamified learning is vital in multiple ways. With the potential to inspire, engage, and generate competition, it becomes an immediate constituent of many successful educational enterprises. Gamified language education benefits English learners because motivation and engagement improve English mastery. It also develops teacher competencies by simulating real-life situations via integrated educational technology. It compensates for the lack of native speakers and an authentic English environment. Technology-assisted and primarily considered a product of technology or emerging technology, gamified learning blends reality with virtuality within seconds, intensifies classes, mingles fun with work, turns impossible into possible, and ignites students' interest in English. The research is substantiated and relevant because it contributes to further digitalization and humanization of English learning and requires profound attention to adjust to the current situation in Ukraine. Introducing novelty and initiating experiments in teacher education makes future English teachers staunch proponents and agents of transformation. Such professional dispositions will result in long-term and lasting effects on the quality of English learning at Ukrainian secondary schools.

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