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Beyond Books and Grammar: Turning Language Learning into a Game

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1. Introduction

The rapid development of information and communication technologies (ICT) has significantly transformed contemporary education. In modern pedagogical practice, the roles of teachers and students have changed considerably. Teachers are no longer regarded as the primary source of knowledge but rather as facilitators who mediate between learners and instructional content, while students have shifted from passive recipients to active participants in the learning process (Pavlina, Ivanjko, & Gorički, 2018).

In response to declining student engagement and increasing academic underperformance (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Finn, 1989), blended learning approaches have been widely adopted. Blended learning combines traditional instruction with digital learning environments, improving accessibility and engagement (Bakeer, 2018; Banditvilai, 2016).

More recently, educators have incorporated play-based learning strategies supported by digital technologies. Play is widely recognized as a key component of cognitive development (Piaget, 1962). This has contributed to the emergence of game-based learning and gamification in education (Deterding et al., 2011; Hamari et al., 2014).

Gamification refers to the application of game design elements in non-game contexts and has been widely adopted across various domains (Huotari & Hamari, 2017). In education, it has been shown to increase motivation, engagement, and learner satisfaction (Zarzycka-Piskorz, 2016; Faya Cerqueiro & Martín-Macho Harrison, 2019). Research further suggests its potential in supporting language learning in higher education (Asmalı, 2018; Ivanjko & Grubješić, 2019).

Despite growing interest, the integration of gamification into English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction remains underexplored. This study therefore reviews existing literature on gamification in ESP contexts, aiming to identify established findings and research gaps (Hamari et al., 2014; Mayer, 2011).

2. Methodology

This study employs a systematic literature review approach to examine gamification in language learning, with a focus on ESP contexts.

The Scopus database was selected due to its comprehensive coverage of academic publications. The search query used was:

*TITLE-ABS-KEY (gamif) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ("language learning")**

Only peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, reviews, and book chapters were included. Non-academic publications were excluded.

The search, conducted in November 2019, initially yielded 75 records. A multi-stage screening process was applied:

1. Removal of duplicates and irrelevant studies
2. Retrieval of full-text articles
3. Exclusion of non-English publications
4. Selection of empirical studies with clear methodology and data analysis
5. Final eligibility assessment based on relevance to ESP and gamification

After screening, 22 empirical studies were included in the final analysis.

3. Results

The selected studies (2008–2019) reveal several key research directions in gamification and language learning. Due to scope limitations, this review focuses on the most methodologically robust and conceptually relevant studies, particularly those applicable to ESP instruction in higher education contexts.

3.1 Games and Gamification – Conceptual Foundations

Digital transformation has significantly changed user behavior, shifting individuals from passive consumers to active participants in digital environments. This shift enables the use of cognitive surplus, allowing individuals to engage in interactive digital activities, including gaming (Shirky, 2010).

Gaming is now a widespread activity across age groups. The Entertainment Software Association (ESA, 2019) reports that approximately 60% of Americans play video games daily, with a diverse demographic distribution that includes a large proportion of adult players. This expansion highlights gaming as a mainstream cultural activity rather than a niche entertainment form.

In response, researchers and practitioners have explored how game principles can be applied in non-game contexts. Gamification is defined as the integration of game design elements into non-game environments (Deterding et al., 2011). A related concept, gameful design, refers to creating experiences that evoke game-like engagement and motivation (Deterding, 2015).

One of the key analytical frameworks in this field is the MDA model—Mechanics, Dynamics, and Aesthetics (Hunicke, LeBlanc, & Zubek, 2004). Mechanics refer to rules and systems, dynamics describe player interaction, and aesthetics represent emotional experiences generated through gameplay.

In educational contexts, gamification has been shown to increase motivation, engagement, and enjoyment (Tinati et al., 2017; Prestopnik & Tang, 2015). These effects are particularly relevant for language learning, where sustained engagement is essential for skill development.

4. Discussion

The reviewed literature indicates that gamification positively influences learner motivation and engagement in language learning environments. In ESP contexts, where learners must acquire domain-specific language skills, gamification provides an effective mechanism for increasing participation and reducing learning barriers.

Blended and technology-enhanced learning environments further support the effectiveness of gamified approaches, particularly when integrated with digital platforms and interactive tools (Banditvilai, 2016).

However, despite promising findings, research on gamification in ESP remains limited in scope, with relatively few large-scale or longitudinal studies. Many existing studies rely on small sample sizes or short-term interventions, limiting generalizability.

Additionally, there is a need for more theoretically grounded research that connects gamification design principles with measurable language learning outcomes.

5. Conclusion

In an increasingly globalized labor market, students are expected to develop both disciplinary knowledge and strong English proficiency, particularly in English for Specific Purposes (ESP). As demand for ESP instruction grows, innovative pedagogical approaches are required to meet learner needs effectively (Ivanjko et al., 2019).

The reviewed literature suggests that gamification can significantly enhance learner motivation and engagement, addressing persistent challenges in traditional instructional settings. Educators who integrate ICT and gamified methodologies may therefore be better positioned to meet contemporary educational demands.

However, current research remains limited in depth and methodological diversity. Further empirical studies are needed to better understand the long-term effectiveness, limitations, and pedagogical implications of gamification in ESP learning environments.

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Trends