

## GAMIFICATION AND MOTIVATION IN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

by:

**Annabelle T. Crisostomo**

*Teacher II, Justice Emilio Angeles Gancayco Memorial High School*

For many learners, especially in foreign language contexts, staying motivated over time is a major hurdle. Gamified tasks address this by offering visible goals, immediate feedback, and a playful learning environment that encourages persistence. As a result, students are more likely to practice consistently—even on low-stakes mobile apps—leading to cumulative gains in vocabulary, fluency, and confidence.

A systematic review by Zhang and Hasim (2023) of empirical studies in EFL/ESL instruction found widespread use of gamification across diverse settings and skills. They reported that game elements such as digital badges, leaderboards, and quizzes generally improved learners' language ability, attitudes, and emotional responses, though some drawbacks—like technical issues or competitive pressure—were noted when poorly managed. The meta-evidence confirms that well-designed gamification can foster a more authentic and dynamic language learning atmosphere, reinforcing the learner's sense of achievement and momentum.

More targeted research further illustrates how gamification can elevate psychological well-being in tandem with language outcomes. Liu, Fathi, and Rahimi (2024) conducted an experimental study comparing digital gamified activities versus non-digital counterparts among EFL learners. The findings revealed that students using gamified mobile lessons showed significantly higher gains in language achievement, foreign-language enjoyment, and ideal L2 self—the vision learners hold of themselves as proficient future speakers. These affective and motivational gains are vital: learners who

perceive themselves as thriving in a second language are more likely to engage, persevere, and take risks in communication.

Another recent study by Shen, Lai, and Wang (2024) examined how gamification affects motivation and learning outcomes in online language courses. Their model showed that learners' motivation mediated the relationship between gamification and achievement, while digital literacy moderated the effect—meaning that learners with stronger tech skills benefited more from gamified designs. This result underscores the need to tailor gamification strategies to the learner profile: not all students respond equally to every element, and some may require scaffolded entry into gamified tasks.

In classrooms and digital platforms, teachers and designers often select game elements like points for correct responses, streak bonuses, narrative challenges, or collaborative quizzes. These components tap into human tendencies for mastery, competition, and social connection. When learners earn badges or rank in a leaderboard, they may feel a sense of competence and progress. When invited to beat their previous high score, they feel motivated to return to practice. When working in teams, a gamified quiz becomes a social event—and language emerges organically through interaction.

However, gamification is not a panacea. The same review by Zhang and Hasim (2023) cautioned that if competition becomes excessive or technical glitches arise, learner frustration can outweigh enjoyment. Without alignment to pedagogical goals, game features may distract rather than support learning. Similarly, Luo's 2023 systematic review noted that gamification misuse—such as overemphasis on badges or rankings—can lead learners to focus on superficial achievement rather than deeper language processing. In such cases, learners may play the educational game rather than internalize the language content.

Effective gamification should therefore be purposeful and balanced. Educators must ensure that game elements reinforce meaningful practice. A typical lesson could

involve a vocabulary challenge with a time limit, followed by a peer-comparison but with cooperative feedback instead of cutthroat competition. In another context, unlocking a story-based activity requires successful completion of comprehension questions – but the point of the activity is communicative development rather than points alone.

Importantly, gamification tends to support the psychological needs defined in self-determination theory: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When learners choose challenges that align with their interests (autonomy), receive meaningful feedback and mastery cues (competence), and connect with peers through team play or shared streaks (relatedness), intrinsic motivation flourishes. This intrinsic motivation not only boosts immediate engagement but sustains effort over time – often even more than extrinsic motivators like grades or external rewards.

Moreover, gamification can nurture the ideal L2 self, which is especially significant for learners of English as a foreign language with limited immersive environments. If a gamified app presents a scenario in which the learner plays the role of a traveler interacting in English, the learner's imagination and future self-concept can shift toward fluent use of the language. Liu et al. (2024) found that gamified learners reported stronger ideal L2 selves – an identity marker that predicts sustained motivated behavior.

While the positive effects are compelling, educators should remain mindful of learner diversity. Some students respond better to collaborative challenges, while others find leaderboards intimidating. As Shen et al. (2024) showed, digital literacy influenced how effectively learners engaged with gamified tasks. Instructors should consider offering alternative pathways: a student with low tech confidence might start with low-stakes, narrative-based mini-games, while others can dive into competitive or social modules.

Technology access also matters. A recent scoping review noted that in low-resource settings, internet connectivity issues or device limitations can hinder

engagement with gamified platforms, possibly reducing motivation rather than enhancing it B. Ensuring equitable access—through offline features, shared devices, or mobile-friendly design—is essential to avoid leaving some learners behind.

Looking ahead, the effective integration of gamification in language teaching requires thoughtful planning: aligning game mechanics with learning objectives, training teachers in facilitation, offering learner choice, monitoring motivational effects, and addressing inequities in access. When implemented with care, gamification offers a powerful way to move learners from passive receivers of language input to active, motivated participants in language acquisition.

#### *References:*

Liu, G.-Z., Fathi, J., & Rahimi, M. (2024). Using digital gamification to improve language achievement, foreign language enjoyment, and ideal L2 self: A case of English as a foreign language learners. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 40(4), 1347–1364.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/jcal.12954> Frontiers Wiley Online Library

Shen, Z., Lai, M., & Wang, F. (2024). Investigating the influence of gamification on motivation and learning outcomes in online language learning. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 15, Article 1295709. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2024.1295709> Frontiers+1PMC+1

Zhang, S., & Hasim, Z. (2023). Gamification in EFL/ESL instruction: A systematic review of empirical research. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, Article 1030790. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1030790>