Gamification As A Modern Approach To Teaching English As A Foreign Language: Theoretical Foundations And Motivational Potential

Meyliyeva Fayoza Erkinovna
Teacher, Department of Foreign Language and Literature,
Tashkent University of Applied Sciences, Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Abstract
The thesis considers gamification as one of the modern approaches to teaching English as a foreign language in higher education. The concept of gamification is defined and distinguished from game-based learning and educational games. The psychological and pedagogical foundations of gamification are analysed, including self-determination theory, the theory of flow and the affective filter hypothesis. The main game elements used in language teaching are described, and their influence on learners' motivation, engagement and anxiety is discussed. It is concluded that gamification is effective when game elements are integrated meaningfully into language learning objectives rather than used as external rewards.
Keywords: gamification; English as a foreign language; motivation; self-determination theory; flow; engagement; game elements; higher education.

Introduction

Modern higher education is undergoing significant changes caused by digitalisation and by the arrival of a new generation of students who have grown up with smartphones, social networks and video games. For these students, traditional forms of instruction based on lectures, memorisation and written exercises often seem monotonous and fail to sustain interest. In foreign language teaching, where success depends largely on regular practice and long-term motivation, the problem of maintaining learners' engagement is especially acute. One of the approaches that has attracted increasing attention from researchers and teachers in recent years is gamification.

The aim of this thesis is to clarify the concept of gamification, to analyse its theoretical foundations and to determine its motivational potential in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) to university students.

Main part

The most widely cited definition of gamification was proposed by S. Deterding and colleagues, who describe it as "the use of game design elements in non-game contexts" [1]. In education, this means applying elements such as points, levels, badges, leaderboards, challenges, narratives and immediate feedback to learning activities in order to make them more engaging. K. Kapp extends this definition, emphasising that gamification uses game-based mechanics, aesthetics and game thinking to engage people, motivate action, promote learning and solve problems [2].

It is important to distinguish gamification from related concepts. Game-based learning involves the use of complete games, digital or non-digital, designed for educational purposes, such as language board games or role-playing games. Gamification, by contrast, does not turn the lesson into a game; it adds game elements to an existing educational process, for example by awarding points for completed homework or organising course units as levels of a quest. In practice, both approaches are often combined in the EFL classroom, but their theoretical distinction helps teachers to choose appropriate tools for specific goals.

K. Werbach and D. Hunter describe the structure of gamified systems as a pyramid of dynamics, mechanics and components [3]. Dynamics are the general aspects of the experience, such as narrative, progression, emotions and relationships. Mechanics are the

processes that drive action, such as challenges, competition, cooperation, feedback and rewards. Components are the specific forms of mechanics and dynamics, including points, badges, leaderboards, avatars, levels and virtual goods. This model shows that effective gamification is not limited to points and badges; these superficial components should serve deeper dynamics that make learning meaningful.

The motivational effect of gamification can be explained by several psychological theories. According to self-determination theory, developed by R. Ryan and E. Deci, people are intrinsically motivated when three basic psychological needs are satisfied: the need for autonomy, the need for competence and the need for relatedness [4]. Well-designed game elements can support all three needs. Choice of tasks, avatars and learning paths supports autonomy; levels, progress bars and immediate feedback create a sense of growing competence; and team challenges and cooperative quests satisfy the need for relatedness. In EFL teaching, this means that gamified activities should give students choices, show them their progress clearly and encourage cooperation in English.

The theory of flow proposed by M. Csikszentmihalyi describes a state of complete absorption in an activity that occurs when the difficulty of a task corresponds to the person's skills, the goals are clear and feedback is immediate [5]. Games are designed to maintain this balance by gradually increasing difficulty as the player becomes more skilled. Applied to language learning, this principle suggests that gamified tasks should be graded in difficulty, from recognition of vocabulary to its productive use in speech, so that students are neither bored by tasks that are too easy nor frustrated by tasks that are too difficult. J. Gee also points out that good video games embody effective learning principles, including learning by doing, risk-taking in a safe environment and "just-in-time" information [6].

For language learning, an important role is played by the affective factor. S. Krashen's affective filter hypothesis states that anxiety, low self-confidence and lack of motivation create a mental barrier that prevents comprehensible input from being acquired [7]. Many EFL learners, especially at the university level, are afraid of making mistakes when speaking in front of their peers. The playful atmosphere created by game elements can reduce this anxiety: in a game, mistakes are perceived as a natural part of the process, and failure can be followed by a new attempt. Z. Dörnyei also emphasises that making learning tasks stimulating and enjoyable, including by adding elements of competition and challenge, is one of the key motivational strategies of the language teacher [8].

A special place among game dynamics belongs to narrative. A storyline turns a sequence of separate exercises into a coherent experience: students may become detectives investigating a case, members of a team preparing an international conference or travellers on a journey through English-speaking countries. Narrative creates a context in which language is used for a purpose, arouses curiosity about what will happen next and links the content of different lessons. In this sense, narrative-based gamification is close to the principles of task-based and communicative language teaching.

Gamification can support the development of all aspects of language competence. In learning vocabulary, game mechanics such as spaced repetition with points, timed challenges and levels encourage the frequent retrieval of words that is necessary for their long-term retention. In grammar, gamified practice turns the repetitive drilling of forms into a series of challenges with immediate feedback, so that students quickly see their errors and correct them. In speaking, role-play missions, quests and team tasks with a storyline create a communicative need and a context for using the language, while in reading and listening, tasks can be organised as investigations in which students must find information to progress to the next stage. In writing, collaborative storytelling and "challenges" with specific language goals make written tasks more purposeful.

Empirical research generally confirms the positive effect of gamification on learning. A literature review by J. Hamari, J. Koivisto and H. Sarsa showed that most studies report positive effects

on motivation and engagement, although the results depend on the context and the users [9]. A meta-analysis by M. Sailer and L. Homner found small but significant positive effects of gamification on cognitive, motivational and behavioural learning outcomes [10]. Studies in second language learning report increased participation, more time spent on practice and improved vocabulary retention in gamified courses [11].

At the same time, researchers warn about the limitations of gamification. A longitudinal study by M. Hanus and J. Fox showed that a course built mainly on badges and leaderboards could reduce students' intrinsic motivation and satisfaction over time, partly because of negative social comparison [12]. When rewards are perceived as controlling, they may replace interest in the activity itself with the desire to obtain points. S. Nicholson therefore distinguishes between reward-based gamification and meaningful gamification, which uses game elements to help learners find personal meaning and connection in the content [13]. For EFL teaching, this means that points and leaderboards should be used moderately, preferably in team formats, while more attention should be paid to narratives, meaningful choices, cooperation and feedback.

The role of the teacher in a gamified EFL classroom also changes. The teacher becomes a designer of learning experiences who determines the objectives, chooses appropriate game elements, sets the rules and balances competition and cooperation. During the lesson, the teacher acts as a facilitator and "game master" who monitors the process, gives feedback and makes sure that the game does not overshadow language learning. After the lesson, the teacher analyses the results and adjusts the design. This requires not only methodological knowledge but also digital competence and an understanding of the psychology of motivation, which should be addressed in teachers' professional development programmes.

On the basis of the analysis, the following principles of gamification in EFL teaching can be formulated: clear connection of every game element to a specific language learning objective; gradual increase in task difficulty; immediate and informative feedback; providing students with choice and autonomy; preference for cooperation and team competition over individual rankings; creating a safe environment in which mistakes are allowed; and combining game elements with meaningful communicative tasks.

Conclusion

Gamification is a modern pedagogical approach that applies game design elements to the process of teaching English as a foreign language. Its theoretical foundations lie in self-determination theory, the theory of flow and the affective filter hypothesis, which explain its potential to increase motivation, engagement and confidence and to reduce anxiety. However, the effectiveness of gamification depends on how it is designed: superficial use of points and badges may have short-term or even negative effects, while meaningful integration of game elements into communicative language learning objectives can make the learning process more effective and enjoyable for university students.

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