Practical Application Of Gamified Digital Tools In Teaching English As A Foreign Language At University

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Abstract
The thesis is devoted to the practical aspects of using gamification in teaching English as a foreign language to university students. The most widely used gamified digital platforms, including Kahoot!, Quizlet, Wordwall, Duolingo and Classcraft, are analysed in terms of their didactic functions and their use for developing vocabulary, grammar and communicative skills. A model for integrating gamified activities into the stages of an English lesson and of a course is proposed. Typical difficulties in the use of gamification and ways of overcoming them are discussed. It is concluded that gamified tools are most effective when they are combined with communicative tasks and used purposefully at particular stages of learning.
Keywords: gamification; English as a foreign language; digital tools; Kahoot!; Quizlet; Duolingo; vocabulary; university students; lesson design.

Introduction

The digital transformation of education has given teachers of English a wide range of tools that make it possible to introduce game elements into the learning process without special programming skills. Online quiz platforms, flashcard applications and gamified learning management systems are now widely used in universities around the world, including in Uzbekistan. However, the availability of tools does not in itself guarantee better learning: teachers often use them occasionally, as entertainment at the end of the lesson, without a clear connection to learning objectives. This creates the need for a systematic approach to the practical use of gamification in EFL teaching.

The aim of this thesis is to analyse the didactic potential of popular gamified digital tools and to propose practical recommendations for their integration into teaching English as a foreign language at university.

Main part

Gamification is understood as the use of game design elements in non-game contexts [1]. In the EFL classroom, the most common elements are points, levels, badges, leaderboards, time limits, challenges, avatars, storylines and immediate feedback. Systematic reviews show that education is one of the most active fields of gamification research, and that most studies report positive effects on student engagement and participation [2]. The choice of specific tools depends on the learning objective, the level of the students and the technical conditions of the classroom.

Kahoot! is a game-based response system in which the teacher creates multiple-choice or true/false quizzes, and students answer from their smartphones in real time, earning points for correct and fast answers. A literature review by A. Wang and R. Tahir showed that Kahoot! has a positive effect on learning performance, classroom dynamics, attitudes and anxiety, although technical problems and time pressure were noted as possible drawbacks [3]. In EFL lessons, Kahoot! is effective for checking vocabulary and grammar, revising material at the beginning of a lesson and diagnosing typical errors, since the results show which questions caused difficulty for the whole group.

Quizlet is a platform for learning vocabulary with digital flashcards and various game modes, including matching games, tests and the team mode Quizlet Live, in which students in randomly formed teams must cooperate to find correct answers. This tool is particularly useful

for learning professional and academic vocabulary, since the teacher can create sets of terms for a specific specialty, and students can continue practising independently outside the classroom. The cooperative mode also encourages students to communicate with each other, which can be done in English.

Wordwall and similar platforms allow teachers to create interactive exercises in game formats, such as quizzes, matching, word searches, anagrams, “spin the wheel” and “missing word” activities. These activities can be used both on an interactive whiteboard with the whole group and individually. The same content can be quickly transferred into different game templates, which saves the teacher’s time and adds variety to practice.

Duolingo is one of the most popular mobile language learning applications and is built on gamification mechanics: experience points, daily streaks, levels, leagues and virtual rewards. A case study by S. Loewen and colleagues found that learners who used Duolingo regularly made measurable progress, and that the time spent in the application was associated with learning gains, although learners’ motivation and persistence varied [4]. For university students, Duolingo and similar applications can serve as a supplement for independent practice, but they cannot replace classroom communication and the development of productive skills.

Classcraft is an example of a gamified classroom management system in which students create characters, form teams and earn experience points for positive behaviour, completed tasks and cooperation. The whole course can be presented as a role-playing game with a storyline. Such systems implement deeper dynamics of gamification, including narrative, progression and teamwork [5, 6], and can be used to organise long-term projects and to motivate regular homework.

In addition to digital tools, many effective gamified activities do not require technology: team vocabulary competitions, grammar auctions, quests with tasks hidden around the classroom, escape-room activities in which teams solve language puzzles to “unlock” the next stage, and role-play simulations of real situations. Such activities are especially important for developing speaking skills, which digital quizzes develop only to a limited extent.

For gamification to be systematic, it is advisable to plan it at two levels. At the level of the lesson, game elements can be used at different stages: at the warm-up stage, a short Kahoot! quiz activates previously learned material; at the presentation stage, Quizlet flashcards introduce new vocabulary; at the practice stage, Wordwall exercises and team competitions consolidate it; at the production stage, quests, escape rooms and role-play tasks require students to use the language in communication; and at the reflection stage, students receive points or badges and evaluate their progress. At the level of the course, the semester can be organised as a journey or quest in which each unit is a level, students accumulate experience points for completed tasks, and badges are awarded for achievements such as presenting a project, participating in discussions or completing all homework assignments [5].

As an illustration, a lesson on the topic “Job interview” for B1-level students can be organised as a gamified mission. Students work in teams of four, and each team represents a candidate applying for a position. At the first stage, teams compete in a Kahoot! quiz on vocabulary related to work and qualifications; correct answers give “coins” that can later be exchanged for hints. At the second stage, each team receives a job advertisement and must prepare answers to typical interview questions using target structures such as the present perfect for describing experience. At the third stage, teams take turns acting as interviewers and candidates, and the other teams assess the interviews using a simple checklist. The team that collects the most points for language accuracy, fluency and cooperation receives a badge, and all students complete a short self-assessment of what they can now do in English. In such a lesson, game elements organise and motivate communication instead of replacing it.

When choosing a gamified tool, the teacher should take into account several criteria: the correspondence of the tool to the learning objective and to the language skill being developed;

the level and age of the students; the technical conditions, including the availability of devices and internet access; the time required for preparation and for the activity in class; the possibility of using the tool for independent work; and the cost of the platform, since many tools limit functions in their free versions. In the conditions of Uzbek universities, where groups can be large and technical facilities vary, tools that work on students' own smartphones and do not require registration, as well as non-digital game formats, are particularly practical.

Practical experience and research data also reveal typical difficulties in the use of gamification. These include technical problems such as unstable internet connection or lack of devices; the excessive time spent on games at the expense of communicative practice; the focus of many digital tools on receptive skills and recognition rather than production; the risk of anxiety and demotivation among weaker students caused by public leaderboards [7]; and the decrease in novelty when the same tools are used too often. These difficulties can be overcome by preparing offline alternatives, limiting game activities to a specific stage of the lesson, combining quizzes with speaking and writing tasks, using team rather than individual rankings, and varying tools and formats.

Gamification should also be inclusive and take into account the individual characteristics of students. Not all learners are equally motivated by competition: some prefer exploration, creativity or cooperation, while others may feel stressed by time limits and public results. Therefore, it is advisable to offer different types of challenges, to allow students to participate anonymously with nicknames in online quizzes, to reward not only the best results but also progress and effort, and to give all students a chance to succeed. When using online platforms, the teacher should also observe the principles of data protection, avoiding the publication of students' personal information and choosing tools that do not require unnecessary personal data. Finally, the effectiveness of gamification should be regularly evaluated through students' feedback, observation and analysis of learning results, so that the teacher can keep the elements that work and change those that do not.

It is also important to align gamified activities with assessment. Points and badges can be included in formative assessment, motivating students to complete tasks regularly, while final assessment should be based on the communicative abilities described in the CEFR descriptors [8]. Data collected by digital platforms, such as quiz results and the number of completed exercises, give the teacher valuable information about the progress of each student and help to adjust further teaching.

Conclusion

Gamified digital tools such as Kahoot!, Quizlet, Wordwall, Duolingo and Classcraft offer the teacher of English effective means of increasing students' engagement, organising vocabulary and grammar practice and supporting independent learning. Their didactic value increases significantly when they are used systematically, at particular stages of the lesson and the course, and combined with communicative tasks that develop speaking and writing skills. Taking into account technical limitations, students' individual differences and the risks of excessive competition makes it possible to use gamification as a sustainable modern approach to teaching English as a foreign language at university.

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