

EFFECTS OF GAMIFICATION ON ESL STUDENTS' COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AT SMK PEKAN TELIPOK

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims at finding out how the integration of gamification influences the ESL learners' communicative competence in SMK Pekan Telipok, Sabah. This study sought to establish the effects of gamification; specifically, Role-Play and Charades on students' engagement, motivation, and language acquisition than conventional ESL teaching approaches. Using a pretest and posttest with 40 Form Four students, the researcher randomly assigned students to an experimental and a control group. The data was collected by means of observation, pre and post-tests, and semi-structured interviews. Based on the study, students in the experimental group who were exposed to gamified learning had a significantly enhanced level of learners' engagement and communicative competence compared to students in the control group. The experimental group had a significant gain in fluency, accuracy, and interaction, thus supporting the use of gamification in language learning. Students of both high and low proficiency levels showed positive feedback during the interviews; the students enjoyed the gamified activities and felt less anxious and more motivated. The finding of this study indicates that the incorporation of gamification in ESL teaching and learning can enhance the learning process and bring better results. The findings of the study also have implications for curriculum, teacher education, and policy change that point to the need for new classroom practices that address the learners' variability.

Keyword(s): *gamification, ESL speaking, communicative competence.*

INTRODUCTION

In the last few decades, the language of instruction, the approaches to teaching, as well as the tools used in teaching have greatly changed especially in the case of ESL. The use of technology in education has gone beyond the conventional methods, creating new frontiers as to how language can be taught and how learners can be made more involved (Yacob et al. , 2022). Thus, in the changing world of language learning, communicative competence, an integral part of language learning, is not confined to grammatical mastery. It encompasses the linguistic competence which enables people to employ language in different situations, comprehend and engage in communication, and comprehend and manage social and cultural factors (Canale & Swain, 1980). In Malaysia, speaking and listening are still considered to be critical areas of development for secondary school students; speakers of English are considered competent if they are able to meet the criteria set out in the Aziz and Kashinathan study (2021). English language has received significant attention from researches over the years and still, students face challenges in attaining reasonable mastery of the language, which causes

demotivation and reduced language usage in tertiary institution and work place (Rafiq et al., 2019).

It can be argued that motivational factor remains of utmost importance in the process of language acquisition as it pushes students to hurdle language difficulties and become more involved in the process. One of the most daunting tasks for the ESL teacher is the issue of motivation, especially as the student moves from one level to another. This is because, the learning of language has been on the rise and the English language stands to be one of the most difficult to learn (Rafiq et al. , 2019). To these problems, gamification has been proposed as a solution as a pedagogical strategy. Gamification refers to the process of applying game characteristics in non-game contexts in order to improve the level of engagement and motivation (Yacob et al. , 2022). Challenges, rewards, and interactive experiences serve as tools of engaging the learners through the use of gamification therefore making the process to be enjoyable than the conventional method of teaching.

This paper seeks to find out the effects of gamification on the English language learning of the students of SMK Pekan Telipok. The emphasis is on the analysis of the impact of gamification on the formation of the speaking and listening skills of students. The relevance of this work is that it can help to resolve the issues with ESL teaching by means of motivating students and their active engagement with the use of game elements in the learning process. Being aware of how technology affects teaching and learning is important for the design of instructional strategies that include gamification for language learning.

Analyzing the current literature, the authors note that is possible to state that gamification has a positive effect on learning outcomes, as it uses such elements as competition, collaboration, and feedback in the learning process (Cruz et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the effects of gamification in increasing motivation and engagement have been established though the impact on communicative competence in ESL contexts has not received much attention. Earlier research has shown that gamification can be beneficial for language learning and language use and application, yet there is a lack of research on how such environments affect the communicative competence in qualitative terms (Yildirim & Cirak-Kurt, 2022; Yunus & Boicu, 2023). Considering these observations, this study will address the following research questions:

1. How do ESL students perceive and experience the impact of gamification on their communicative competence?
2. How does gamification influence the qualitative aspects of communicative competence among ESL students?

As a result, this study seeks to answer the following questions with a view of creating a link between conventional approaches to teaching ESL and the current needs of learners to help understand how gaming might be harnessed in order to boost language teaching and learning in the present era of technological advancements.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this present study, the researcher provides a literature review on the current trend and utilization of gamification in ESL classrooms as well as its effects on the students' communicative competence. The chapter starts with the description of the current practices in the application of gamification in ESL and how contemporary educators adopt game features into language classes. Currently, gamification is an exciting and promising approach in language learning, which uses various platforms and tasks. In the view of Yunus and Hua (2023), applications such as Quizizz are new forms of shifting away from the conventional teaching approaches and encouraging active engagement of students.

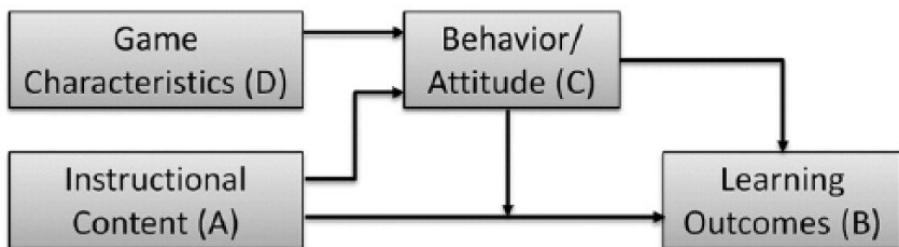


Figure 1: Gamified Learning Theory

Gamification Learning Theory (GLT)

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in two primary theories: The theories that are to be used in the study include; Gamified Learning Theory (GLT) and Communicative Competence Theory. GLT, as advanced by Bedwell et al. (2012) and endorsed by Zaric et al. (2021), is concerned with the effect of game design on actions and dispositions in non-game contexts. GLT asserts that gamification has the potential to improve the learning outcomes because of increased engagement and motivation that comes with game design elements. Also, Nathan and Hashim (2023) pointed out that gamification can help in the development of communication and collaboration among students, which is in line with GLT's focus on the active and participative learning process.

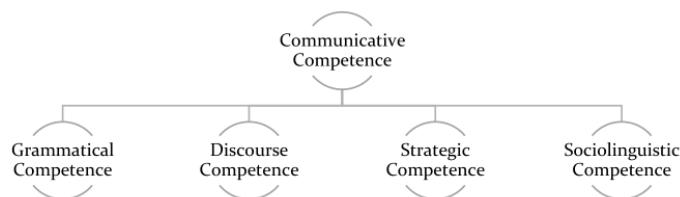


Figure 2: Canale and Swain's (1980) Communicative Competence Model

Communicative Competence Theory

According to Canale and Swain (1980), Communicative Competence Theory goes beyond the mere language mastery to the practical application of language. This theory identifies four components: These are grammatical, sociolinguistic, discursive and strategic competence. The present research is more specifically concerned with strategic competence, defined as the ability to employ communication strategies to bypass difficulties and enhance interaction. Grosser (2023) stresses the role of strategic competence in social interactions and, thus, the significance of the present study for exploring how gamification can improve such competence.

Gamified ESL Learning

The review also identifies the research gaps that are existing in the present literature. To the extent of the present author's knowledge, there is a plethora of research proving the effectiveness of gamification in various learning settings, yet, the detailed understanding of the impact on communicative competence, and specifically in the context of ESL, is scarce. Research works done by Yildirim and Cirak-Kurt (2022) and Yunus and Boicu (2023) reveal that gamification enhances motivation and engagement; however, there is limited evidence on how it affects language learning.

Consequently, this literature review presents the main findings that connect to gamification and its consequences in the context of ESL learning. Thus, the review aims at providing a strong theoretical background for the subsequent analysis of the positive impact of gamification on communicative competence based on GLT and Communicative Competence Theory. This research seeks to fill the gaps by examining the effects of gamification on ESL learners in detail to afford recommended approaches in language learning.

METHODOLOGY

To achieve the purpose of this study, the research used both quantitative and qualitative research methods to establish the impact of gamification to the ESL learners' communicative competence of SMK Pekan Telipok, Sabah. We chose the research methodology that would help to describe the specific effects of gamified learning activities on students' engagement and their linguistic development in detail. To this end, the study apply qualitative data collection methods such as systematic observation, pre and post test and structured interviews.

The study was conducted for several days to be able to record the on-going activities and the level of participation of the students when they are engaged on gamified and traditional ESL activities. This method allowed for discovering how specific elements of gamification, e. g. , role-playing, interactive games, influenced the level of students' engagement, motivation, and communication during classes. The detailed data of the student's behaviour such as their level of participation, the frequency of their participation and the quality of their interaction were documented and thus the impact of gamification was well understood.

Furthermore, a pre- and a post- test were used to analyze the quantitative shift in the students' communicative competence. These assessments aimed at finding students' language abilities, including fluency, accuracy, and interaction, during the beginning and end of the intervention. The major research question of the study was therefore to determine if there was any enhanced communication skills as a result of the gamified learning experience as indicated by the assessments.

Interviews were carried out to the students of the experimental group to get their feedback and perception on the application of gamified instruction. These interviews were meant to ascertain the students' opinions on the gamification activities used in class, the level of enjoyment they got from the activities and the extent to which these activities boosted their confidence and motivation to use English. The data obtained was analysed thematically in order to determine common trends in terms of student engagement, motivation, and perceived shifts in language competence.

The study had a population of 40 Form Four students selected through purposive sampling with the aim of having a sample size of ESL learners. This approach made it possible to recruit participants who had direct experience of the gamified learning environment thus offering important data on the success of the intervention.

To establish the credibility and dependability of the data, the study used standard proficiency tests and standardised procedures in data collection. To analyse the data collected from the interviews and observations, this study employed the technique of Thematic Analysis in order to determine how and in what ways the aspect of gamification influenced the improvement of the students' communicative competence. This methodological framework gave a strong foundation for assessing the efficacy of gamified learning and explained the ways it can be useful for the improvement of ESL teaching.

In conclusion, the mixed-method approach used in the study enabled an effective examination of the effects of gamification on the ESL students' CC as it captured both the changes in the qualitative data and the change in the behaviour of the students.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The present work aimed at investigating the effects of gamification on the ESL learners' communicative competence, and the findings were as follows. The interviews with the students and the observations made by the educators showed that the students were more motivated and engaged when the ESL lessons were incorporate with gamified elements. Some of the activities that the students found helpful include digital quizzes and interactive games; this is

in agreement with the work of Yunus and Hua (2023) who revealed that tools such as Quizizz could transform the traditional teaching methods into more engaging forms of learning.

Apart from the increased interest, the students pointed out that they had also gained in communicative proficiency. They gained more confidence in applying English in different activities especially group tasks and different activities. The teachers also noted that the use of gamified activities improved the students' skills of cooperation and communication. This is in accordance with Nathan and Hashim's (2023) work, which noted that gamification of learning environments can improve the students' communication and collaboration. The positive effect on the communicative competence is in accordance with the Communicative Competence Theory since it is based on the effective usage of language in actual contexts.

This was also borne out by the classroom participation, which rose due to gamified activities. Those students who in the past had come to class without the desire to learn and participate were able to actively participate in the class, in discussions, and in group activities. This shift in participation highlights the opportunities that are presents by gamification that can change the classroom from a passive learning environment to an active one.

When trying to relate these findings with the existing literature, several similarities can be identified. In the present study, the enhancement in motivation and engagement is consistent with the findings of Yunus and Hua (2023) and Cruz et al. (2023), where they also experienced the same positive effects of gamification. This improvement in the communicative competence, is in sync with the observations made by Nathan and Hashim (2023) about the effectiveness of gamification in improving the communication skills. However, this study offers new findings on how the use of gamification impacts on the strategic competence of ESL learners; thus, it extends the understanding of the effects of gamification beyond the general motivation and engagement.

An assessment consisted of a pre-test and a post-test was also applied to measure communicative competence. These tests were essential in gathering data on participants' proficiency levels before and after the gamification intervention. The pre-test, conducted during Week 6 established a baseline, while the post-test Week 14 evaluated their results in speaking and listening abilities following the gamified learning activities for the experimental group and traditional classroom activities for the control group. The assessment administered was a standard speaking test where each pair of students would have to create a conversation based on the topic given to them. They are later scored according to their fluency and coherence, pronunciation and intonation, grammar and vocabulary, and interactive communication.

In the pre-test, the experimental group exhibited scores ranging from 33% to 83%, with an average score of approximately 55%. The control group displayed a similar range of scores, from 30% to 83%, with an average score of about 60%. These initial results indicated that both groups started with comparable levels of communicative competence. The post-test results, however, revealed significant differences between the two groups. In the experimental group, scores ranged from 37% to 100%, with an average improvement of about 20%. Therefore, the changes that were observed indicate a rather positive impact of the gamified learning activities on the students' communicative proficiency.

Experimental Group			Control Group		
Participant	Result		Participant	Result	
P01	25/30	83%	P21	25/30	83%
P02	25/30	83%	P22	23/30	77%
P03	24/30	80%	P23	23/30	77%
P04	22/30	73%	P24	22/30	73%
P05	20/30	67%	P25	22/30	73%
P06	20/30	67%	P26	20/30	67%
P07	20/30	67%	P27	20/30	67%

P08	17/30	57%	P28	18/30	60%
P09	17/30	57%	P29	18/30	60%
P10	16/30	53%	P30	16/30	53%
P11	15/30	50%	P31	15/30	50%
P12	15/30	50%	P32	15/30	50%
P13	15/30	50%	P33	15/30	50%
P14	15/30	50%	P34	14/30	47%
P15	12/30	40%	P35	14/30	47%
P16	11/30	37%	P36	12/30	40%
P17	11/30	37%	P37	11/30	37%
P18	10/30	33%	P38	10/30	33%
P19	10/30	33%	P39	10/30	33%
P20	10/30	33%	P40	9/30	30%

Table 1: Pre-Test Assessment Results

Experimental Group			Control Group		
Participant	Result		Participant	Result	
P01	30/30	100%	P21	26/30	87%
P02	28/30	93%	P22	23/30	77%
P03	28/30	93%	P23	23/30	77%
P04	25/30	83%	P24	24/30	80%
P05	25/30	83%	P25	23/30	77%
P06	23/30	77%	P26	20/30	67%
P07	22/30	73%	P27	23/30	77%
P08	22/30	73%	P28	20/30	67%
P09	22/30	73%	P29	18/30	60%
P10	20/30	67%	P30	15/30	50%
P11	19/30	63%	P31	15/30	50%
P12	18/30	60%	P32	17/30	57%
P13	19/30	63%	P33	19/30	63%
P14	19/30	63%	P34	19/30	63%
P15	17/30	57%	P35	17/30	57%
P16	15/30	50%	P36	11/30	37%
P17	15/30	50%	P37	11/30	37%
P18	15/30	50%	P38	11/30	37%
P19	13/30	43%	P39	10/30	33%
P20	11/30	37%	P40	10/30	33%

Table 2: Post-Test Assessment Results

On the other hand, the control group had only a slight change in the scores. The scores of this group in the post-test were 33 to 87% with an average gain of about 5%. While there were some improvements, for instance, Participant P21 grew from 83% to 87%, and Participant P24 improved from 73% to 80% these were not as significant as those of the experimental group.

The analysis of the results of the pre-test and post-test shows that the group of students who studied with the use of gamified activities had higher gains in communicative competence than the group of students who used traditional learning approach. This implies that the use of gamification is a very useful method for developing language proficiency since it seems to enhance students' motivation and participation, which in turn effects better learning.

Based on the pre and post test results of the experimental group, one can conclude that when teaching a language through games there is better improvement in the language competence of the learners. Furthermore, the findings from the semi-structured interviews helped in giving a better understanding of the students' experiences. This is because high proficiency students enjoyed the competitiveness and cooperation elements of gamification which created the students' interest and gave chances to perform at a higher level. The low proficiency students however felt that they had less anxiety and were more willing to engage in the activities when they are in a non-threatening, game environment. This result is in agreement with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis that holds that the affective factor might play a pivotal role in determining the acquisition of language (Krashen, 1982).

To get more detailed information about the students' perception, experience, and concern about the gamified ESL learning, the semi-structured interviews were used. The interviews were conducted with 10 students of the experimental group, five students with the intermediate level of proficiency and the other five students with low English proficiency. Also, the interviews were conducted in a one-on-one manner in order to make them comfortable with the interviewer and therefore be able to give their opinions freely. The interview questions were designed to explore both perceptions of gamification and its impact on communicative competence to answer the first research question.

Participant	Category/Characteristics
P01	Experimental group. Intermediate level of proficiency in English.
P02	
P03	
P04	
P05	
P06	Experimental group. Lower level of proficiency in English
P07	
P08	
P09	
P10	

Table 3 : Semi-structured Interview Participants

The students in the higher proficiency group expressed positive experiences with gamification as it has made learning more enjoyable and effective in improving the communicative competence. They enjoyed the role-play activity as they believe it helps them to enhance their communicative competence for real-life conversations. P01 stated "*I like that the role-playing game a lot because we received marks for like every correct sentence we used in the different scenarios. Then we can know exactly what to say when we go through the same thing in real life*". Additionally, they found the competitive elements of the games motivating, as earning points for correct answers turned learning into a challenge rather than a routine task. P02 commented "*I'm competitive so the games we played made me feel excited. It wasn't boring because we wanted to win*". Other than that, the students highlighted the benefits of team-based activities, which improved their collaborative skills and effective communication in group settings. P03 said "*When we played the games in groups, we all wanted to win so we talked a lot. Like Charades game, it was so funny because we talked like rappers to explain the word*". P04 also added "*Charades was fun, and I remember like I need to talk a lot because the words are very hard to explain*". Finally, felt that gamified lessons made learning more enjoyable and reduced stress, contributing to increased enthusiasm for attending classes. P05 said "*Teacher, actually before this English was just meh, just okay but because we play games a lot in your class, it's more fun*".

Low proficiency students also reported positive impacts from gamification, though their experiences differed slightly. Firstly, they expressed how gamification can reduce anxiety and create a more comfortable setting for practicing English, which is particularly beneficial for low proficiency students. P06 said "*It is less nervous feeling. I can practice with more fun with Charade and less nervous with many people in class*". It is also important to point that the low proficiency students preferred the visual and interactive components which underlines the fact that gamified tools increase the learning motivation and make the process less stress for the students who have difficulties with the language learning. P07 said in support, 'Many picture and video so it easy to understand English'. Finally, the research also shows how the use of gamification enhance learning to make it fun and exciting thus increase the participation and motivation of the low proficiency learners. P08 reported, '*In game Charades, everyone have to play so I talk more English and practice speaking*'. In conclusion, they discovered that the low pressure condition of the games enhanced their volitility and their usage of English.

In sum, the interviews suggested that gamification can help both high and low proficiency learners: the former – because it offers them more challenges and opportunities to engage in advanced practice, while the latter – due to the increased confidence and the development of basic communicative competence. These results are in support of the theory that gamification greatly improves both motivation and competence in the ESL classroom.

The second research aim is to explore the effect of gamification on the rhetorical feature of communicative competence among ESL learners. This was assessed through observations and pre and post test assessments. The experimental group enhanced fluency, accuracy, and interaction in the study. The data showed that students were more active and participated more during the gamified activities hence proving that gamification has a positive impact on the qualitative aspects of communicative competence.

Limitations

Several weaknesses of the study should be noted. The present study had a small sample size of students and educators, which may not be generalisable to all students and teachers of English as a Second Language. Also, the study used interview data, and the participants may have provided socially desirable responses to the questions and, hence, not give an accurate account of their experiences. These constraints suggest that the results should not be overextended to all ESL situations.

Recommendations

Possible directions for future research include the use of a larger and more heterogeneous sample to increase external validity of the study. To build a more robust profile of the effects of gamification, self- reports could be supplemented with other information, like teachers' and students' observations and evaluations, as well as achievement results. Longitudinal studies could provide information on how gamification impact on communicative competence in the long run. A combination of qualitative and quantitative data can be used in the analysis to give a detailed account of the effects of gamification. In addition, the analysis of different types of the gamified activities and their consequences on the development of particular aspects of the second language learners' communicative competence can contribute to the development of the effective prescriptions for the integration of the gamification in ESP classroom.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the study therefore was to establish the effectiveness of gamification on the ESL students' communicative competence at SMK Pekan Telipok, Sabah. Applying the mixed-

methods research design, it was established that gamified learning activities positively impacted on students' engagement, motivation, and language learning than in the traditional classroom setting. This study used observations, pre-test and post-test assessments, and semi-structured interviews to reveal that while, the experimental group, which was exposed to gamified activities, had a better improvement of their communication skills than the control group. High proficiency students enjoyed the challenging and competitive aspect of the task while low proficiency students liked the low pressure and non-threatening environment. These findings show that gamification has the ability to enhance the interest and success of ESL teaching and learning. Consequently, the research indicates that the incorporation of gamified activities into the ESL lesson plans is effective in enhancing engagement for both high and low proficiency learners. This can be effective in catering for the different learning needs of the learners as well as enhance the overall achievements thus making it important for teachers and other stakeholders in the education systems. Nonetheless, the study has the following drawbacks: the participants were few, and the period of the research was short, thus limiting the applicability and durability of the results. Further research should consider these limitations and extend the previous studies by investigating the durability of gamification, by comparing it across different levels of education, as well as by considering the roles of different students' characteristics in the process of learning. The present work could be extended by exploring other types of gamified activities and different technological tools to increase the knowledge about the use of gamification in the context of ESL education.

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