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Gamification in the University EFL Classroom: Enhancing Engagement and Motivation

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Abstract: This classroom-based study investigates the impact of gamification on engagement and motivation in university-level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes. The intervention was implemented with 50 first-year students at Asian International University over a six-week period. Gamification elements included points, badges, leaderboards, and digital quizzes through Kahoot and Quizizz. Observations revealed increased student participation, improved vocabulary retention, and a more positive classroom atmosphere. Informal student feedback indicated that gamification transformed lessons into enjoyable and competitive learning experiences, encouraging students to prepare and participate more actively. The findings support the use of gamification as an effective pedagogical tool for enhancing student engagement, provided that competition and collaboration are balanced and activities are meaningfully aligned with course objectives.

Keys words: Gamification, EFL teaching, student engagement, motivation, higher education, digital quizzes, interactive learning

Introduction. Engaging students in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom is one of the most significant challenges in higher education. At the university level, many students approach English classes with mixed attitudes: some are motivated by career aspirations, while others see the subject as merely a requirement. As a result, participation levels can be uneven, and students sometimes remain passive listeners rather than active participants. Gamification — the application of game design elements in non-game contexts — has recently gained attention as a way to increase motivation and engagement in education. Points, badges, leaderboards, and competitive activities are all tools that transform a regular class into an interactive experience (Deterding et al., 2011). Several studies have shown that gamification promotes active learning, collaboration, and improved knowledge retention (Aminah et al., 2024; Heliyon, 2022).

The purpose of this classroom-based study was to explore how gamification could be used to increase participation and motivation in my university-level English classes. As an instructor at Asian International University, I sought to make lessons more interactive and enjoyable while still achieving course objectives. This article presents the design of the gamified activities, observations of student behavior, and reflections on the effectiveness of this approach.

Methods. The intervention was carried out in two first-year EFL classes at Asian International University during the spring semester. The total number of participants was 50 students, aged 18–20, with English proficiency levels between A2 and B1 (CEFR). Most students had studied English in secondary school, but their experience with communicative, interactive tasks was limited. To implement gamification, I incorporated several elements into my weekly lesson plans: Points and Rewards:

Students earned points for speaking English in class, answering questions, submitting homework on time, and helping classmates. Points were recorded weekly and shared with the class to create a sense of progress. Digital Tools: I used Kahoot and Quizizz for vocabulary and grammar reviews. These platforms allowed me to create visually engaging quizzes that rewarded speed and accuracy. Badges and Leaderboards: At the end of each week, the top three students received virtual badges displayed on the classroom board. A leaderboard showed cumulative scores to encourage friendly competition. Mini-Competitions: Pair and group work were framed as short contests. For example, students raced to complete information-gap activities or create the longest list of synonyms for a target word. I observed students' participation levels, recorded the number of volunteers in speaking activities, and noted behavioral changes throughout the six-week period. Informal feedback was also gathered through quick end-of-class reflections, where students shared what they liked or found challenging about the activities.

Results. A clear increase in participation was observed by the second week. Initially, only 6–7 students regularly volunteered answers during open discussions. By the fourth week, more than half of the class actively participated in speaking tasks. Students who were usually silent began competing for points and engaging in pair work. The general mood of the classroom became more positive and energetic. Laughter and excitement were common during Kahoot quizzes. Even students who were hesitant about competition expressed enjoyment after realizing that mistakes did not result in penalties but were treated as learning opportunities. Students appeared to retain target vocabulary more effectively. During review sessions, they recalled new words faster and used them correctly in short writing tasks. Quiz scores also showed gradual improvement over the six weeks. Informal feedback indicated that students appreciated the gamified elements. Many said that the competitive aspect made lessons feel less like "traditional classes" and more like a "fun challenge." Several students reported that earning points motivated them to prepare for class.

Discussion. The results suggest that gamification can significantly enhance student engagement in the university EFL classroom. This aligns with previous studies that found gamification to be an effective motivational strategy (Aminah et al., 2024). In particular, the combination of points, leaderboards, and digital quizzes created a sense of progress and achievement, which encouraged students to take risks and participate more actively. One key insight was the importance of balancing competition with collaboration. While leaderboards motivated some students, others were initially anxious about public scoring. To address this, I shifted the focus to group-based challenges and rewarded effort as well as accuracy. This helped create an inclusive atmosphere where weaker students also felt encouraged to contribute. Another observation was that gamification required careful planning to remain meaningful. If points were given too freely, students lost interest; if tasks were too difficult, weaker students disengaged. The most successful activities were those that were appropriately challenging, visually appealing, and connected to the learning goals.

Conclusion. Gamification is a powerful tool for increasing engagement and motivation in university EFL classrooms. My experience at Asian International University shows that integrating points, badges, and interactive quizzes can transform passive learners into active participants. While careful implementation is necessary to avoid stress or unfairness, the benefits — including improved participation, vocabulary retention, and classroom atmosphere — make gamification a valuable addition to language teaching. Future research could explore combining gamification with project-based learning or peer assessment to further enhance students' sense of ownership and autonomy.

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