



A Self-Determination Theory Model of Gamified EFL Intrinsic Motivation

¹ Luu Dat Phi, ² Nguyen Vu Thanh Xuan, ³ Do Linh Chi, ⁴ Nguyen Tan Phat

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Abstract; The growing use of gamification in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) areas has provoked important issues regarding how the design of a game can motivate and keep learners engaged for a long time. This paper presents a theoretical framework of the role of game elements grounded on self-determination theory in sustaining internal motivation in the case of collectivist EFL cultures, as opposed to previous models that considered gamification merely as a form of external reward. Through the analysis of the mediating factors of task authenticity and anxiety reduction, and the moderating variable of cultural power distance, the research offers a context-sensitive comprehension of the mechanisms through which gamified, need-supportive structures protract learner engagement. The proposed model brings into focus the importance of feedback loops, progression indicators, and social interaction in the process of enhancing perceived competence and relatedness in EFL learning. The structure additionally provides for the crafting of gamified pedagogical environments that support intrinsic motivation and sustainable learning practices. Hence, this study is a forte for theory development by incorporating self-determination theory in the EFL sector and providing a systematic basis for later investigations into the synergy between gamified learning and motivation.

Keywords: *Gamification; Self-Determination Theory; Intrinsic Motivation; Sustained Engagement; Language Learning Motivation; Gamified Instruction.*

1. Introduction

Gamification in the EFL teaching has transformed to be one of the fastest-growing pedagogical innovations that supports the integration of game elements such as point, badges, challenges,

¹ Luu, P. D. Bachelor, Ho Chi Minh City University of Industry and Trade, Vietnam. Email: datphi19030@gmail.com. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-9359-4780>

² Xuan Vu Thanh Nguyen, Bachelor, Ho Chi Minh City University of Industry and Trade, Vietnam, nguyenvuthanhxuanjoy@gmail.com

³ Chi Linh Do, Bachelor, Ho Chi Minh City University of Industry and Trade, Vietnam, dolinhchi45@gmail.com

⁴ Phat Tan Nguyen, Bachelor, Ho Chi Minh City University of Industry and Trade, Vietnam, nguyentanphat.1234.tgdd@gmail.com



feedback, and rewards into the learning process in order to create a more interesting and motivating environment (Arunsirot, 2020; Deterding et al., 2011). It is one of the most common practices in EFL, and this has been made possible by the use of technology, for example, Kahoot!, Quizlet, and Padlet, which are all online platforms, and they are all providing fun and interactive ways to make students better in vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension, and language competence in general (Degirmencioğlu & Gılanlıoğlu, 2023; Qadri Tayeh & Malkawi, 2024; Sanemueang, 2025). The latest researchers assert the existence of several benefits that gamification can offer among which the boosting of syntactic knowledge, reflecting learning, and the lessening of anxiousness are the most emphasized ones (Huseinović, 2024; Jara Chiriboga et al., 2025). Gamification has not only been a source of fun but gamified systems have now become educational interventions based on theories of motivation such as flow and SDT, where the aim is to gradually, but surely, instill, with the help of the need satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, the acquisition of the behavior, emotion, and cognition that corresponds to intrinsic engagement (Tursunbayevich, 2024; Luu et al., 2025).

Although the results are encouraging, a significant question remains to be answered that whether the gamified engagement actually intrinsic and self-sustainable or it is just fueled by external factors such as rewards and competition (Sailer & Homner, 2020). In many EFL classes around Asia, the teaching approach is predominantly teacher-centered, grammar-oriented, and exam-driven, consequently, limiting the amount of student autonomy and real communicative skills practice (Borja et al., 2015; Khaled et al., 2020; Nguyen & Boers, 2019). Such a milieu often results in compliant and extrinsically motivated learners instead of self-determined ones (Chang, 2021; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Learners' anxiety, dependency on teacher validation, and lack of autonomy are some of the factors that lead to disengagement and ultimately to shallow learning (Lamb, 2017). Gamification is one of the methods that promise to solve these motivational deficiencies; however, some critics assert that the heavy reliance on rewards might only encourage extrinsic control rather than developing internalized, autonomous motivation (Hanus & Fox, 2015; Mekler et al., 2017). Even though gamification was widely accepted, the majority of its designs still followed the behaviorist approach, which highlighted the compliance driven by rewards instead of the engagement driven by autonomy. This inconsistency in theory demands a new conceptualization of gamified learning based on the SDT viewpoint.

Self-determination theory (SDT), first created by Deci and Ryan (1985, 2000), is a very strong theory to explain that great learning environments nurture intrinsic motivation or disrupt it through satisfying the three basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The satisfaction of these needs leads to persistence, engagement, and well-being, which the learners experience very positively (Ryan & Deci, 2024). SDT, in the context of gamified EFL teaching, demonstrates the game mechanics specifically like leaderboards, badges, and feedback systems that may support or annoy these needs (Sailer et al., 2017). For example, leaderboards can be viewed as a source of recognition of one's capabilities and an avenue for competition, but at the



same time, they may create a distance among peers and impose a performance-related stress (Kratochvil et al., 2025). Similarly, reward systems can push students to give their best in a short period of time but may cause a downfall in the process of self-regulation and the development of intrinsic interest if the students consider them to be instruments of external control (Koivisto & Hamari, 2019). Hence, SDT gives a very comprehensive and advanced theoretical basis for analyzing critically how gamified environments impact the quality of motivation, not just the quantity of motivation.

From this point, the paper being discussed presents a framework based on SDT for gamified EFL instruction which signifies that intrinsic motivation and protracted participation can be comprehended theoretically via the SDT principles. The major purpose of this theoretical paper is to amalgamate and critically discuss the present-day gamification research through the SDT lens leading to an analytically grounded model that conceptualizes the psychological mechanisms connecting the gamified design elements to learner motivation and engagement. This research's novelty is in combining the gamification design principles with the motivational psychology in order to specify the theoretical conditions under which, and the reasons why, particular game elements may lead to self-determined instead of extrinsically motivated learning behaviors. This framework's importance can be viewed from three perspectives; first, it adds a new dimension to the theoretical comprehension of learners' motivation in the field of technology-mediated language learning; second, it introduces some guiding rules for designing gamified instruction that supports autonomy and enhances competence; third, it gives a conceptual basis for subsequent research directed towards the understanding of the EFL contexts' motivational pathways. This paper solely relies on theory, it does not conduct any data collection but rather synthesizes existing evidence to provide a coherent analytical framework for later empirical validation. In order to provide a clear understanding and to direct this conceptual exploration, the following guiding research question is posed that how can gamified instructional design systematically support learners' autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which are essential for intrinsic motivation and sustained engagement in EFL learning? By advocating a thoroughgoing theoretical scheme, which is the integration of cultural and affective dimensions to the SDT model, the question raised by the paper will be resolved through the process of explaining sustained engagement. After defining this goal, the subsequent sections examine the theoretical underpinnings of SDT and gamification, conducting a critical review of previous research, and preparing the ground for the suggested conceptual model.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1. Integrating Gamified Learning and Second Language Acquisition

The role of gamified learning in the teaching and learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has become a matter of great research interest, very much owing to the claims of its capacity to bring about such things as engagement, motivation, and persistence in language learning



(Deterding et al., 2011; Luu et al., 2025). Gamification is a broad concept that implies the integration of game elements, mostly points, badges, leaderboards, levels, quests, and narratives into the non-game learning environments, all the while aiming for a more engaging and motivating experience (Koivisto & Hamari, 2019; Sailer et al., 2017). Nevertheless, empirical evidence is in favor of positive effects on the participation, task frequency, and affective responses (Degirmencioglu & Gilanlioglu, 2023; Yang, 2022), but the consequences are very much linked to the teaching context and quality of design. To illustrate, poorly constructed leaderboards or too much external rewards might bring about only the temporary compliance rather than the sustained engagement of students, thus pointing out the importance of the principled and theory-driven approach (Mekler et al., 2017; Sailer & Homner, 2020). Different studies have done the mapping of specific game mechanics to SDT constructs and engagement outcomes. One of the examples is that points, badges, and leaderboards mainly correspond to the need for competence, while narrative and choice mechanisms are in favor of autonomy and relatedness. It can be seen in Table 1 that points and badges being the methods of giving rewards and recognition, however, they do not make the maintenance of competence as their primary goal which may lead to the overemphasis of extrinsic incentives. Hence, their motivational power is determined by the degree to which feedback is interpreted as informative or controlling, a subtlety that is very important to SDT.

Table 1. Mapping Game Elements to SDT

Game Element	SDT Psychological Need	Potential Engagement Outcome
Points/Badges/Levels	Competence	Increased self-efficacy, skill mastery
Choice/Customization	Autonomy	Enhanced intrinsic motivation, learner control
Collaboration/Team Challenges	Relatedness	Peer interaction, social engagement
Narrative/Storylines	Autonomy and Relatedness	Emotional investment, sustained participation

Although there have been numerous studies on the topic of gamification, the seeping research has largely considered game elements and the benefits of motivation separately. Not many researchers combine motivational theory with the design and assessment of gamified EFL tasks. The lack of such an approach puts the SDT at the forefront of theories that help us understand the intrinsic motivation and long-lasting engagement that can be brought about by gamification.



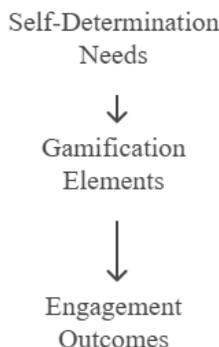


Figure 1. A Conceptual Diagram

2.2. SDT as a Motivational Lens

SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2024) argues that the basic psychological needs, such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness are crucial for achieving optimal motivation and psychological well-being. In the context of language learning, the need for autonomy is the learner's view of having a say in their learning activities, the need for competence means feeling effective and mastering the skills, and the need for relatedness is the feeling of having social ties and being accepted (Noels, 2001; Reeve & Cheon, 2021). Satisfying these needs is a factor of higher intrinsic motivation, persistence, and self-regulation while controlling or externally dominated learning environments can reduce engagement and lead to demotivation (Deci et al., 1999; Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2021).

SDT presents a more than one-sided perspective of motivation along a self-determination continuum, which successfully reflects the internalization of external goals into personally endorsed values, covering all the way from amotivation to fully integrated regulation (Vansteenkiste et al., 2010). In gamified EFL, the aforementioned features such as narrative scaffolds, adaptive challenges, and meaningful feedback can be really powerful in enhancing learners' autonomy and competence, thus promoting internalized, self-determined engagement. On the contrary, if the learners' psychological needs are not met, then the overemphasis on points, badges or competitive rankings could eventually lead to a decrease in intrinsic interest (Luu et al., 2025; Sailer et al., 2017).

2.3. Bridging Gamification and SDT in Second Language Acquisition

The combination of gamification and SDT is a very good way to demonstrate how different elements of gaming can lead to the same motivational and cognitive outcomes in learning a new language as by traditional methods through non-gaming means. Simple games along with progress indicators act as feedback sources which are telling the learners not only the



distance they have covered but also their skills are being strengthened; badges and leaderboards can be social recognition that enhances relatedness; and narrative quests merely provide significant contexts that support self-determination and the need to be involved in (Sailer et al., 2017; Koivisto & Hamari, 2019). With curriculum objectives and scaffolding language tasks, these features can create a continuum of learner interest, support taking risks and bring retention; outcomes that are necessary for communicative competence and fluency (Lamb, 2017; Degirmencioglu & Gilanlioglu, 2023).

Furthermore, the results from studies suggest that gamified intervention based on the principles of SDT provides engagement that is deeper compared to that of the latter mentioned ones inspired solely by extrinsic rewards. Cornering the issue of SLT and pedagogy alignment (Jara Chiriboga et al., 2025; Yang, 2022), researchers have found that autonomy-supportive digital playful tasks offer students the liberation to take part in communication, the lowering of anxiety, and the propelling of flow experiences. On the contrary, where gamification is done through competition or extrinsic rewards and provision is not made for psychological needs, it may not only lead to uncommitted participation but also withdrawal (Mekler et al., 2017; Sailer & Homner, 2020). Thus, an integration of gamified and SDT that is theoretically informed can help second language acquisition practitioners in crafting interventions of the nature that they are not only engaging but also promoting learning that is gradually and intrinsically motivated.

The merger of gamification and SDT within second language acquisition leads to the development of a conceptual framework whereby game features are treated as facilitators to meet the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, thus resulting in intrinsic motivation and constant engagement. The framework provides a more analytical angle on the strategic design of gamified interventions as it reveals the interdependence of pedagogical aims, motivational processes, and learning outcomes rather than depicting gamification or motivation as separate and additive factors. Such integration creates a new avenue for empirical research to explore the impact of various gamified features on motivation and language proficiency in heterogeneous EFL environments. For greater elucidation, Table 2 comprises the mapping of SDT necessities towards gamification elements, and the anticipated engagement consequences.



Table 2. Mapping SDT Needs to Gamification Elements and Engagement Outcomes

SDT Basic Need	Gamification Elements	Expected Engagement Outcomes
Autonomy (sense of control & choice)	Choice of tasks/paths, branching scenarios, customizable avatars	Increased intrinsic motivation, greater ownership of learning
Competence (sense of effectiveness & skill)	Points, badges, levels, performance feedback, challenges	Improved skill mastery, confidence, behavioral engagement
Relatedness (sense of social connection)	Leaderboards, team challenges, collaborative quests, discussion forums	Enhanced social engagement, peer support, emotional engagement
Motivational reinforcement (supporting sustained effort)	Streaks, progress bars, narrative/storytelling, meaningful rewards	Sustained engagement, persistence in learning tasks, agentic engagement

3. Literature Selection and Coding Procedure

The study applies a conceptual synthesis method (Torraco, 2016; Snyder, 2019) instead of a systematic review as its main objective is to weave together theories and empirical knowledge in a conceptual manner rather than in a statistical way. The synthesis is concerned with exposing the links between gamification, motivation, and engagement through the lens of SDT. This conceptual synthesis was based on Torraco's (2016) four-stage approach to integrative literature review, which was adapted to the field of gamified EFL instruction and SDT. The method included the next steps.

The domain was delineated.

The researchers restricted the literature to those studies and theoretical contributions that explicitly talked about gamification or game elements in language learning contexts and also to those studies that applied the SDT model to motivation in EFL/ELT settings. In the course of the research, the researchers utilized the most important academic databases (Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC) to search for the combinations of the keywords gamification, game elements, SDT, intrinsic motivation, engagement, and EFL/ESL. The scoping phase had no limitation regarding dates so as to include both classic and contemporary works.

Identifying theoretical patterns

From the chosen pool, titles and abstracts were examined for relevance. Full texts that discussed gamification design features, motivational mechanisms, or engagement outcomes were kept for conceptual analysis. 53 studies were finally included in the synthesis after screening (the included corpus consisted of empirical studies, meta-analyses, and theoretical/conceptual articles).

Comparing conceptual frameworks

The chosen investigations were put under a comparative microscope to see the differences in each source's interpretation of game elements and design features, SDT constructs (autonomy, competence, relatedness), and engagement outcomes (behavioral, emotional, cognitive, agentic). The first step was that two researchers worked separately on coding the papers through a pre-



structured coding template. They then discussed and came to a mutual understanding for defining the codes in case of any disputes. The coding was mainly concerned with connecting design features to SDT needs, naming the mediators/moderators reported, and accumulating proof regarding the time dynamics (e.g., short-term vs long-term engagement).

Developing integrative propositions

To continue with the mapped patterns, the researchers have come up with the recurring mechanisms and tensions (e.g., informational vs controlling feedback; cultural moderators) and thus have developed integrative propositions that link need-supportive gamified design to need satisfaction and subsequently to internalization and sustained engagement. In cases where empirical findings were not in agreement, the researchers made the boundary conditions explicit and proposed accessible moderators for future research.

4. Conceptual Approach and Theoretical Positioning

This manuscript utilizes a conceptual synthesis method instead of an empirical one. The maturing of the framework is being done through a very critical review process (Snyder, 2019; Torraco, 2016), that merges the theories of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2024) with real-world data from gamification research in education (e.g., Sailer et al., 2017; Hanus & Fox, 2015; Li et al., 2024). The examined literature was categorized into three major points, namely, the application of SDT needs in gamified learning environments, the motivational effects of design that support autonomy, competence and relatedness, and the linking of game elements to the prolonging of engagement in EFL settings through a mediating process.

The review is not systematic in a quantitative sense; however, it follows a transparent, purposive synthesis process that ensures the inclusion of the most conceptually influential and empirically supported studies that relate SDT and gamification. Through iterative comparison and theoretical abstraction, the research is able to uncover constructs and relational patterns that have appeared in previous frameworks. Theoretical contribution of this paper is based on the fact that it integrates SDT applications with technology-mediated EFL environments by proposing an integrative framework that links gamification mechanics to need-supportive motivational processes. In particular, it performs the reconceptualization of game elements (e.g. badges, leaderboards, quests) not as external rewards but rather as psychological affordances that could possibly nurture autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Therefore, the paper provides a critical reinterpretation of gamified motivation as an intrinsically driven system rather than a reward-based one.

5. Proposed Conceptual Model

The proposed structure boosts the model of need-supportive gamification by Sailer and Homner (2020) to the point of practically the same and agentic engagement as a higher-order motivational outcome. While Sailer and Homner's framework opened connections between the usage of game



design elements and the meeting of basic psychological needs, it was very much in the background and indeed biased against any particular domain. The present framework is already moving much further, putting forth the idea that it is precisely the three contextual moderators, namely linguistic task authenticity, cultural power distance, and learner anxiety, which are crucial in the interaction between such need-supportive mechanics and EFL settings in Asia. In short, the model assumes three causal phases:

- (1) Need-supportive gamified design (game elements promoting choice, feedback on competence, social connection)
- (2) Satisfaction of social needs (namely, self-regard, compassion, and resoluteness)
- (3) Self-determined motivation and engagement outcomes, including behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and mainly agentic engagement, are the ones defined as learners' proactive contribution which is to shape their own learning environment (Reeve & Tseng, 2011; Reeve, 2013; Reeve, 2023).

This framework diverges from previous gamification models that mainly emphasized compliance and performance gains, and instead considered engagement as a multi-dimensional and self-regulatory process rather than a response to external stimuli. Agentic engagement is characterized as a higher-order construct that emerges when autonomy, competence, and relatedness are jointly satisfied - indicating the learner's internalization of motivation and active role in co-constructing learning interactions. The authors propose three mediating and moderating mechanisms to explain the differences in the motivational impact of gamified designs across various contexts:

Cultural power distance (moderator)

In collectivist or high power-distance cultures, if autonomy-supportive design elements (e.g., open choice, flexible goals) conflict with the norms of authority or conformity in the classroom, they may not necessarily increase the autonomy of the students.

Task authenticity (mediator)

The similarity of gamified tasks to real-world communicative use mediates the internalization process, thus boosting the feeling of competence and meaningfulness.

Reduction of anxiety (mediator/moderator)

The introduced playful and game-like formats in the evaluations, thus, indirectly making the participant's intrinsic motivation and engagement to be sustained.

Generally, the model plays a significant role in the SDT-based gamification research improving it via the incorporation of contextual and affective aspects in the motivational route and thus providing a framework that is more in tune with cultures and also grounded in pedagogy. It



indicates that the engagement in EFL gamified learning is not only through the rewards that are well-designed but also through the students' perceived agency, being the active will of learners to transfer the influence to the learning activities, other learners and the outcomes of the tasks. As depicted in Figure 2, the model outlines a three-phase motivation process starting from need-supportive game-like design to sustained engagement, where psychological need satisfaction and self-determined motivation act as a mediator. While task authenticity and anxiety decrease act as mediators promoting internalization, cultural power distance limits the initial supportive effects of game design on needs.

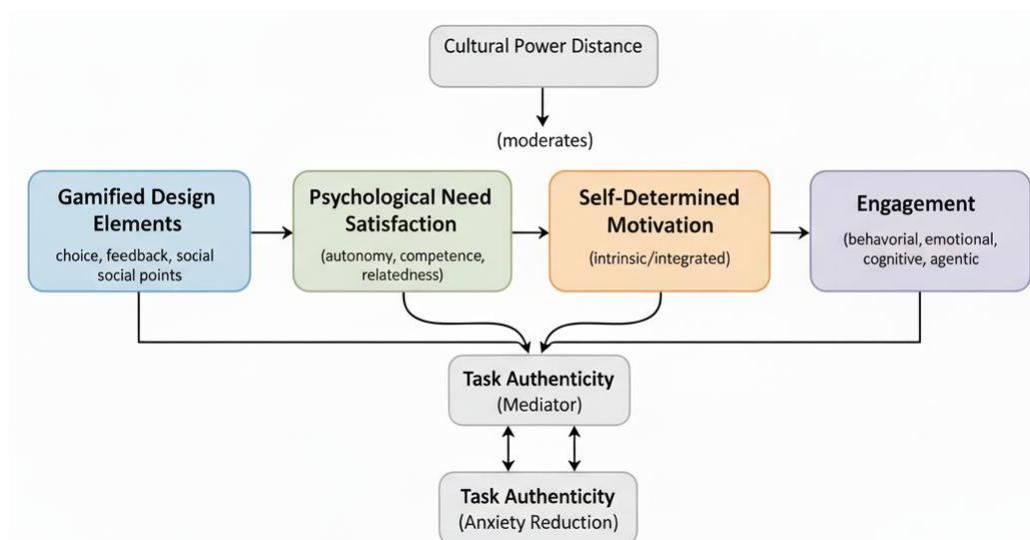


Figure 2. SDT in EFL Learning

6. Implications and Future Directions

Therefore, SDT signals an absolute period for theory, education and research to step into the field of gamified EFL teaching. In offering a new perspective on gamification with respect to the basic psychological needs, the new model not only encourages the development of motivational theory in the process of second language learning but also gives practical guidelines for both teaching design and research with humans as subjects. The combination of SDT and gamification not only represents a major step forward in language learning motivation research but also a revolutionary idea in the field of language learning motivation. This framework does not map the core SDT factors onto digital, game-mediated environments only, but it also considers the teacher support and feedback as part of the very digital gamification process (Noels et al., 2019; Oga-Baldwin & Nakata, 2017). Moreover, it is a massive SDT application, which considers gamification as a need-supportive structure for learners rather than a mere technology that enhances learning (Ryan & Deci, 2024; Sailer & Homner, 2020). The most striking thing about this model is that it opposes the instrumentalist perspective that sees extrinsic rewards as the main source of motivation in gamified learning. Rather, it argues that motivation is an internalization process in which the

elements of the game move from being extrinsic motivators to being owned and regulated by the learner positively (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Hanus & Fox, 2015). As a result, this model implies that digital teaching methods can be an effective environment for self-determination practice, and this is a step beyond just behavioral manipulation.

The model already from a teaching point of view suggests important factors for creating gamified EFL learning environments that could not only draw the students but also involve them in a genuine and long-term way. First, the issue of authenticity could not be stressed enough; it is a must that the game elements were meaningful in the context and were also aligned with the communicative learning goals rather than being imposed as something superficial just for being there (Domínguez et al., 2013). Learner choice, which is accompanied by customizable tasks, flexible pacing, and adaptive difficulty, directly promotes autonomy and thus activates engagement (Reeve, 2012). Besides, feedback systems such as progress tracking, mastery-based leveling, and formative feedback should be applied in a way that their effects are competence-enhancing and not performance-induced anxieties (Li et al., 2024). Moreover, the development of collaborative gamified tasks (like team-based challenges, peer quests) could be a means of relatedness promotion and competition pressure reduction, thus a social learning environment is created that may even support the case of techniques application mentioned earlier (Zarzycka-Piskorz, 2016). Therefore, the principles of gamification hereby established are directed both towards deeper psychological engagement and less demanding language learning outcomes. The suggested model for research purposes guarantees the empirical testing of the whole by using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Mixed-methods designs can produce statistical evidence and contextual explanation (Dörnyei, 2020) by bringing out how need satisfaction works as a mediator between gamified design features and learner engagement. Longitudinal studies, actually, are very important to track changes in motivation over time, so, they will be able to separate passing excitement from lasting involvement (Mekler et al., 2017; Sun & Hsieh, 2018). Besides, cross-cultural studies will probably be able to show the influence of sociocultural factors like collective thinking or exam-oriented learning on the processes of internalization that are so important for SDT (Lamb, 2017; Chen et al., 2022). In addition, narrative accounts of learners and classroom ethnographies will be forms of qualitative research that will allow the development of theories by uncovering the self-determination experience in gamified EFL settings.

In order to overcome the current conceptual model limitations, future empirical research can take some directions. First, validity studies in different cultures can check if the suggested gamified SDT framework for EFL learning is applicable without major changes in various cultural contexts. Second, longitudinal studies can explore how the links among need-supportive design, psychological need satisfaction, intrinsic motivation, and sustained engagement change with time. Third, mixed-method designs that merge quantitative measures of engagement and motivation with qualitative insights from learners' interviews or classroom observations could give richer understanding of the mechanisms behind gamified EFL instruction.



7. Conclusion

This paper has indicated that the SDT be recognized as a basic perspective for the understanding of motivation in the case of gamified EFL teaching. The study regards gamification as a framework for motivation based on theory, which makes the question of how autonomy, competence, and relatedness jointly facilitate engagement and language learning processes a very complicated and therefore interesting one. The structured approach of gamified learning is set up to be a part of a psychological ecosystem that seeps through only minimally the external rewards and instead of that considers satisfaction of the learners' psychological needs as the main reason for their being and achieving. This blending of theories puts it to the hottest topic of research in motivation area by drawing the threads of SDT and the coming educational application of gamification together. It points out that viewing motivation as a process being dynamic, self-regulatory and long lasting is the major factor when it comes to external incentives. Therefore, it breaks the simplistic reductionist notions that limit gamification to behavior modification based on rewards and punishment and it shifts the focus to the cognitive and emotional processes that are at play in the learners being highly engaged in the language learning situations.

The framework encourages the behavior of the educators and designers of instructions to consider gamification as a planned practice grounded on the theory. The best EFL atmospheres which are gamified shouldn't be the ones that only apply and repeat the gaming mechanics but rather, intentionally combine them with the physiological needs of the learners so that, they are empowered to act rather than being controlled. The viewpoint stated above necessitates a transition from the designing for fun to the designing for autonomy, where playfulness is the medium for genuine learning, empowerment, and connection. The incorporation of SDT along with gamification ultimately leads to a more critical and reflective approach to the use of technology in language learning. It will demand that both researchers and practitioners shift their mindsets from being just enthusiastic to being very intentional in their approaches. That is, the innovations that will be backed by psychological theory, empirical rigor, and pedagogical ethics will be the ones that will rise. Only in this way can gamified instruction be regarded as a sustainable and transformative paradigm for the motivation of EFL learners in the digital age.

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