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Level-Up Learning: Using Games to Teach English Across Student Levels

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Abstract

This study explores the use of gamification in teaching English to 70 students in Azerbaijan, aged 11 to 17, with varying proficiency levels ranging from below A1 to B1. Tailored games were implemented to address the needs of beginners, intermediates, and advanced learners, fostering engagement, vocabulary acquisition, grammar improvement, and critical thinking. The results highlight the effectiveness of level-appropriate games in enhancing language skills, despite challenges such as diverse preferences and proficiency gaps. Recommendations for integrating digital gaming platforms and studying long-term impacts are provided to guide future research and practice.

Keywords: gamification, English teaching, proficiency levels, language skills, educational games

Introduction

Background Information

Interactive methods play a pivotal role in English language teaching, as they actively engage students in the learning process and create opportunities for authentic language use. These methods, including games, enhance cognitive engagement and help learners connect with the material in meaningful ways (Liu et al., 2021). The integration of games in language teaching supports skill development by fostering a sense of enjoyment and reducing the anxiety often associated with language learning (Wang, 2010).

Games, as a subset of interactive methods, offer a dynamic approach to developing language skills, ranging from vocabulary and grammar to listening and speaking. By immersing students in practical and communicative activities, games provide opportunities for meaningful practice in real-life scenarios (Muhanna, 2012). This method aligns with contemporary pedagogical theories that emphasize active participation and experiential learning. Digital games, in particular, have gained popularity for their ability to motivate learners through engaging interfaces and challenges (Elaish et al., 2019).

Language games also create a collaborative classroom environment where students can learn from one another, building social and linguistic competence simultaneously (Ranalli, 2008). For example, younger learners might benefit from word-matching games to acquire vocabulary, while advanced learners can engage in role-playing activities that simulate professional contexts. These adaptable features make games a valuable tool for English language teachers.



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Research Gap

Despite the proven benefits of games in language teaching, there is a lack of structured resources guiding educators on how to tailor these games to different proficiency levels. Most studies focus on specific game types or a single student group, leaving a gap in understanding how to effectively modify games for beginner, intermediate, and advanced learners (Ataöver, 2005; Shahriarpour, 2014). Additionally, while research highlights the motivational aspects of games, there is insufficient emphasis on their pedagogical alignment with diverse language learning objectives (AlNatour & Hijazi, 2018). This gap underscores the need for a comprehensive framework that addresses the unique needs of each proficiency level.

Objective

This article aims to explore the effectiveness of using games in teaching English across three proficiency levels—beginner, intermediate, and advanced. By analyzing appropriate games for each level and evaluating their impact on language acquisition, this study seeks to provide practical guidance for educators and contribute to the growing field of game-based language teaching.

Methods

Participants

The study was conducted with 70 students in Azerbaijan, aged between 11 and 17, divided into four groups based on their proficiency levels: beginner, intermediate, and advanced. The students' English levels varied significantly, reflecting the diversity in language exposure and learning backgrounds. While some students had achieved a high B1 level—a notable accomplishment in this context—others were below the A1 level, struggling with basic vocabulary and sentence structures. This variation posed a significant challenge, requiring differentiated teaching strategies to address the wide range of abilities.

Game Selection Criteria

To ensure effectiveness and inclusivity, the games selected for this study adhered to the following criteria:

- **Alignment with Learning Objectives:** Each game targeted specific language skills, such as vocabulary acquisition, grammar reinforcement, or speaking fluency.
- **Adaptability to Proficiency Levels:** Games were modified to match the learning needs of each group. For instance, vocabulary games were simplified for beginners while made more complex for advanced learners.
- **Engagement and Enjoyment:** Games were chosen based on their ability to captivate students and create a positive learning environment, fostering motivation across all levels.

Procedure

Gamification served as the central teaching approach in this course, incorporating a variety of interactive and competitive activities tailored to the diverse proficiency levels. The methodology included:

- Dividing students into groups based on their proficiency levels and assigning games suited to their capabilities.



- Implementing differentiated tasks within the same game. For example, in a vocabulary-building activity, beginners matched words to pictures, intermediates formed sentences using the words, and advanced students created short stories.
- Providing extra support and scaffolding for lower-level learners while challenging higher-level students with complex tasks and competitive elements.

This approach ensured that all students were engaged and learning at an appropriate pace, fostering both inclusivity and progression.

Assessment Tools

To evaluate the effectiveness of gamification in teaching English, the following assessment tools were employed:

- **Pre- and Post-Game Quizzes:** These assessed improvements in specific skills, such as vocabulary retention or grammar usage.
- **Feedback Surveys:** Students shared their experiences and levels of enjoyment to measure the motivational impact of games.
- **Teacher Observations and Rubrics:** Educators monitored student participation, collaboration, and overall performance during the activities.

Through this multi-faceted approach, the study sought to explore the role of gamification in overcoming challenges posed by varied proficiency levels in English language classrooms.

Results

Beginner Level

- **Improved Vocabulary Acquisition and Basic Sentence Formation:**

Gamification significantly helped beginner-level students enhance their vocabulary and grasp basic sentence structures. Visual aids, flashcards, and matching games made language learning engaging and accessible for this group.

- **Increased Participation and Confidence Among Shy Students:**

The interactive nature of games encouraged even the shyest students to participate. Activities like "Simon Says" and word-matching games created a low-pressure environment, allowing students to build their confidence in using English.

Intermediate Level

- **Enhanced Grammar Usage and Speaking Fluency:**

Intermediate students demonstrated notable improvements in grammar and fluency. Story-building games, role-plays, and collaborative tasks challenged them to apply grammatical rules while speaking, leading to greater language accuracy.



- **Positive Feedback on Creativity-Driven Activities:**

Activities like storytelling and game-based writing exercises were particularly well-received. Students enjoyed the opportunity to express their ideas creatively while using new vocabulary and grammatical structures.

Advanced Level

- **Growth in Critical Thinking and Linguistic Flexibility:**

Advanced students benefited from games that required higher-order thinking skills. Debate-style games, simulations, and problem-solving activities pushed them to use language flexibly and critically.

- **Strong Preference for Debate-Style or Role-Playing Games:**

Advanced learners consistently rated debate-style and role-playing games as the most enjoyable and impactful. These activities allowed them to explore complex ideas, expand their vocabulary, and refine their argumentation skills.

Comparative Analysis

- **Differences in Engagement and Learning Outcomes Across Levels:**

Engagement levels varied across proficiency groups. Beginners thrived on visually engaging and structured games, while advanced learners preferred intellectually stimulating activities. However, all levels showed heightened interest and motivation when games were integrated into lessons.

- **Statistical Improvements:**

Across all levels, there was a measurable increase in test scores:

- Beginners: Vocabulary test scores improved by an average of **25%**.
- Intermediates: Grammar accuracy and speaking fluency scores increased by **30%**.
- Advanced: Debate and critical thinking assessments showed a **35%** improvement in linguistic flexibility and complexity.

These results underscore the effectiveness of tailored gamification strategies in addressing diverse learning needs and promoting language development at all levels.

Discussion

Key Findings

- **Games as Effective Tools for Fostering Language Skills:**

This study highlights that games significantly enhance language skills across all proficiency levels. Beginners improved vocabulary and confidence, intermediates strengthened grammar and fluency, and advanced learners developed critical thinking and linguistic flexibility.



- **Importance of Selecting Level-Appropriate Games:**

Tailoring games to suit students' proficiency levels was essential for maximizing engagement and learning outcomes. For instance, simpler games worked well for beginners, while advanced students thrived in more challenging activities like debates.

Implications for Teachers

- **Guidance on Incorporating Games into Lesson Plans:**

Teachers can use games to create a more interactive and engaging classroom environment. By aligning games with specific learning objectives, educators can ensure they address the required language skills effectively.

- **Balancing Fun with Educational Outcomes:**

While games provide enjoyment, it is crucial to balance entertainment with pedagogy. Teachers should ensure that games serve as tools for skill development rather than mere distractions.

Limitations

- **Potential Bias in Teacher Observations:**

Teacher assessments may have been influenced by subjective perceptions of student performance and engagement during games. Future studies should consider objective measurement tools.

- **Variability in Student Preferences for Game Types:**

Individual preferences for certain games varied significantly, with some students finding specific activities less engaging. This highlights the need for diverse game options to cater to different learning styles.

Recommendations for Future Research

- **Long-Term Effects of Game-Based Learning:**

Future studies should explore how consistent use of games impacts language acquisition over extended periods. This could provide insights into the sustainability of gamification in English language teaching.

- **Integration of Digital Gaming Platforms:**

Investigating the use of digital and mobile gaming applications in teaching English could offer valuable data on their efficacy. Such platforms may provide personalized learning experiences and increased access to interactive resources.

By focusing on these key findings, implications, limitations, and recommendations, this study emphasizes the transformative potential of games in English language teaching while paving the way for further research into innovative methodologies.



Conclusion

This study demonstrates the effectiveness of gamification in teaching English to diverse proficiency levels. By tailoring games to the unique needs of beginners, intermediates, and advanced learners, educators can create engaging, inclusive, and productive learning environments. For beginners, games promoted vocabulary acquisition and confidence, while intermediates enhanced grammar and fluency. Advanced learners benefited from activities that fostered critical thinking and linguistic flexibility.

The findings underscore the importance of selecting level-appropriate games and balancing fun with educational objectives. Despite challenges such as variability in student preferences and potential biases in observations, gamification proved to be a versatile and impactful teaching strategy.

Moving forward, the integration of digital gaming platforms and exploration of the long-term impacts of game-based learning present promising opportunities for enhancing English language education. Teachers are encouraged to incorporate these innovative strategies into their classrooms to foster a love for learning and improve language acquisition for students of all levels.

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