Original research article / Originalus mokslinis straipsnis
Vol. 1 No. 6 (2025): Rugpjūtis

Immersive and Gamified Approaches: VR/AR in Language Learning

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Accepted: 07.20.2025
Published: 08.01.2025
https://doi.org/10.69760/portuni.0106002

Abstract. The evolution of digital technologies has significantly transformed language education, offering novel pathways for immersive and engaging learning experiences. Among these innovations, virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies—especially when combined with gamification—have demonstrated the potential to revolutionize second language acquisition. This paper synthesizes current research on immersive and gamified language learning, highlighting the effectiveness of VR and AR environments in enhancing motivation, interaction, fluency, and learner autonomy. Grounded in experiential learning theory (Kolb, 2014) and the benefits of multisensory learning (Shams & Seitz, 2008), the study applies a conceptual analysis framework to systematically review and categorize the affordances and limitations of VR/AR tools in language education. Drawing on literature from Lin and Lan (2015), Parmaxi (2023), and others, this article identifies major thematic outcomes such as cognitive engagement, decreased anxiety, and adaptive learning opportunities. Despite their promise, challenges such as technological cost, access disparity, and instructor training remain barriers to mainstream adoption. The findings underscore the pedagogical potential of immersive-gamified strategies and call for more longitudinal, empirical, and interdisciplinary research. Practical implications for language teachers and policymakers are discussed, with future directions aimed at equitable implementation and evidence-based practice.

Key words: *Virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), gamification, immersive learning, language acquisition, experiential learning, multisensory learning, technology-enhanced language education*

1. Introduction

The digital transformation of education has ushered in a paradigm shift in how languages are taught and learned. Traditional classroom methods—centered on textbooks and passive learning—are increasingly being challenged by immersive, interactive, and personalized technologies. Among the most groundbreaking of these are immersive technologies, particularly virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR). These tools enable learners to interact with virtual environments or overlay digital elements on the real world, thereby transforming language learning into an experiential, multisensory process (Lin & Lan, 2015; Wu et al., 2013).

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Closely tied to these developments is the pedagogical use of gamification, defined as the application of game-like elements (e.g., points, rewards, competition) in non-game contexts such as education. Gamification, when thoughtfully implemented, can increase learner engagement, motivation, and resilience (Dehghanzadeh et al., 2021; Flores, 2015). Its integration into VR/AR platforms creates highly interactive and emotionally engaging language learning experiences, especially when compared to conventional digital tools or classroom methods.

The convergence of VR/AR and gamification in language education presents a timely opportunity to reimagine second language acquisition (SLA). Unlike static e-learning environments, immersive platforms enable situated learning, where learners practice language skills in contextualized, lifelike scenarios. For example, a VR-based language app may simulate a café in Paris, allowing a French learner to order coffee, interact with avatars, and navigate social customs—all in real-time. These experiences are not merely engaging but also pedagogically grounded in experiential learning theory, which posits that knowledge is constructed through concrete experience and reflection (Kolb, 2014). Moreover, as Shams and Seitz (2008) argue, multisensory learning—learning that involves visual, auditory, and kinesthetic inputs—can enhance comprehension, memory, and cognitive flexibility.

These immersive environments also support interactionist views of language acquisition, which highlight the role of meaningful communication in developing language competence (Swain & Lapkin, 1998). For instance, virtual tasks that require learners to collaborate or negotiate meaning with peers or AI characters can replicate authentic linguistic exchanges. Additionally, as Genesee (1994) emphasized in the context of immersion programs, language learning is more effective when it is content-integrated and occurs within purposeful, real-world tasks.

In recent years, the potential of VR/AR and gamified tools has expanded with the growing sophistication of mobile technology, cloud computing, and artificial intelligence. Systematic reviews by Parmaxi (2023) and Xie et al. (2019) have shown that educational applications are trending toward increased personalization, interactivity, and learner-centered design. VR and AR are no longer considered niche technologies but are becoming viable, scalable tools in both formal and informal education settings. Nevertheless, a critical examination of their actual impact, accessibility, and pedagogical validity in language education remains lacking.

This article aims to fill that gap by addressing the following research questions:

1. What are the key affordances and limitations of immersive VR/AR environments in second language learning?
2. How does gamification within immersive environments influence language learners' motivation, engagement, and proficiency?
3. What pedagogical frameworks best support the integration of immersive-gamified technologies in language education?
4. What challenges and opportunities emerge in the implementation of these technologies at scale?

Through a conceptual synthesis of current literature, this study critically examines how immersive and gamified approaches shape language acquisition, with particular attention to cognitive, affective, and social dimensions. It further explores the theoretical underpinnings, practical applications, and ethical considerations of implementing VR/AR in language classrooms.

2. Methods

2.1. Research Design and Type of Study

This study adopts a conceptual and literature-based synthesis approach, aimed at critically examining existing research on immersive and gamified technologies in second language learning. Rather than conducting an empirical experiment, this article offers a theory-informed analytical framework, drawing on diverse peer-reviewed sources to evaluate pedagogical patterns, effectiveness, and challenges associated with the integration of VR, AR, and gamification in language education.

This method aligns with the objectives of a theoretical contribution: to map, categorize, and synthesize knowledge while proposing a coherent narrative that advances understanding and guides future research. The synthesis relies on systematic reviews, empirical studies, and theoretical papers published primarily between 2002 and 2023, capturing the evolution of immersive and gamified approaches over two decades.

2.2. Theoretical Framework

Two primary theoretical lenses guide this analysis:

- Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 2014): Central to immersive environments, this theory emphasizes learning as a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. VR/AR technologies simulate real-life contexts in which learners can experience, reflect, and apply new language knowledge meaningfully.
- The Four-Dimensional Framework for Immersive Learning (De Freitas et al., 2010): This model helps evaluate immersive learning by considering context, learner characteristics, pedagogical models, and the representation of content. It supports analysis of how VR/AR tools align with educational goals and user needs.

Additional supporting perspectives include:

- Interactionist SLA theory (Swain & Lapkin, 1998), highlighting communicative practice.
- Multisensory learning theory (Shams & Seitz, 2008), emphasizing the integration of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic modalities.
- Gamification theory (Dehghanzadeh et al., 2021; Flores, 2015), examining motivational dynamics and learning outcomes in game-like environments.

2.3. Reference Selection Criteria

References were selected based on the following inclusion criteria:

1. Relevance: Articles must directly examine the role of immersive technologies (VR/AR) and/or gamification in second language learning or broader educational contexts.
2. Scholarly Rigor: Only peer-reviewed journal articles indexed in established academic databases (e.g., Scopus, Web of Science) were considered.
3. Recency and Significance: Preference was given to studies from the past decade (2010–2023), although seminal earlier works (e.g., Billinghurst, 2002; Genesee, 1994) were included due to their foundational influence.
4. Diversity of Methodologies: Both quantitative and qualitative studies, as well as systematic reviews and conceptual analyses, were included to ensure comprehensive coverage.
5. Interdisciplinarity: Studies spanning fields such as applied linguistics, educational technology, psychology, and computer science were considered to capture the multifaceted nature of the topic.

Key references include Lin and Lan (2015), Parmaxi (2023), Hung et al. (2018), Wu et al. (2013), and Suh and Prophet (2018), among others, whose insights inform the categorization and interpretation of immersive learning outcomes.

3. Results

This section synthesizes recurring themes from the literature on immersive (VR/AR) and gamified approaches to second language learning. Drawing from conceptual analyses, empirical studies, and systematic reviews, four dominant categories emerged: (1) motivation and engagement, (2) communicative competence and fluency, (3) cognitive processing and load, and (4) pedagogical adaptability and learner personalization. These themes reflect both the strengths and limitations of immersive-gamified environments in language acquisition.

3.1. Motivation and Engagement

A central finding across studies is that VR/AR platforms—especially when gamified—significantly enhance learner motivation and engagement. Dehghanzadeh et al. (2021) noted that gamification elements such as real-time feedback, rewards, leaderboards, and avatar progression contribute to sustained learner interest. Similarly, Flores (2015) emphasized that immersive games help reduce learner anxiety, especially among shy or low-confidence students.

In VR-based environments, the novelty and sensory richness of simulations promote emotional investment. For example, Lin and Lan (2015) demonstrated that students learning English in a VR environment exhibited greater time-on-task and enthusiasm compared to peers using traditional digital tools. These findings align with Kolb's (2014) experiential learning model, wherein learners gain satisfaction and meaning from concrete experiences.

Parmaxi's (2023) review further revealed that AR-enhanced tasks—such as scavenger hunts or object-recognition activities—trigger curiosity and foster intrinsic motivation, particularly among younger

learners. However, motivation levels tend to be higher when learners perceive a sense of control and relevance, which calls for careful instructional design.

3.2. Communicative Competence and Fluency

Interaction-rich environments—particularly those simulating real-world settings—are associated with improved speaking fluency, vocabulary retention, and pragmatic awareness. Swain and Lapkin (1998) emphasized the importance of task-based collaboration in SLA, which immersive platforms can replicate effectively.

For example, avatar-based conversation tasks in VR scenarios have been shown to improve learners' ability to formulate extended utterances and respond spontaneously (Hung et al., 2018). In simulated shops, airports, or cultural festivals, learners are required to use functional language, adjust to sociolinguistic cues, and negotiate meaning.

The integration of gamified narratives (e.g., language quests or mystery-solving games) also fosters situational language use, as learners must employ vocabulary and grammar to progress through storylines (Flores, 2015; De Freitas et al., 2010). These activities create low-stakes environments that lower affective filters and encourage language risk-taking.

3.3. Cognitive Processing and Load

While immersive learning environments offer high engagement, several studies point to the dual-edged nature of cognitive load. VR and AR environments—rich in visual, auditory, and interactive stimuli—can either facilitate or overwhelm cognitive processing depending on their complexity.

Shams and Seitz (2008) argue that multisensory learning generally improves memory and comprehension; however, excessive stimuli or poor interface design can lead to distraction. Suh and Prophet (2018) found that novice learners may experience disorientation or extraneous load in poorly scaffolded VR activities.

To optimize cognitive effectiveness, Parmaxi (2023) and Wu et al. (2013) recommend adaptive interfaces, clear objectives, and layered task complexity, especially for beginners. Xie et al. (2019) highlighted the role of AI and learning analytics in tailoring task difficulty and reducing overload.

3.4. Pedagogical Adaptability and Personalization

One of the key affordances of VR/AR-enhanced language learning is the ability to adapt to individual learner needs. According to Xie et al. (2019), technology-enhanced platforms increasingly incorporate personalized learning paths, learner analytics, and real-time scaffolding, allowing educators to respond dynamically to each student's progress.

AR applications, such as those described by Yuen et al. (2011) and Kesim and Ozarslan (2012), often use mobile sensors to adapt tasks based on physical location, learner input, or even emotional feedback. This situational adaptability fosters context-rich learning that is difficult to replicate in traditional classrooms.

Gamified systems also support competency-based progression, where learners move at their own pace and receive customized feedback. However, as Billinghurst (2002) cautioned, effective integration requires careful alignment with curriculum objectives and learner proficiency levels.

4. Discussion

The results of this conceptual synthesis illuminate the powerful role that immersive and gamified technologies can play in reshaping second language acquisition (SLA). By grounding the findings in established SLA theories and pedagogical models, this section explores the educational implications, practical limitations, and future directions for applying VR, AR, and gamification in language learning contexts.

4.1. Theoretical Implications for SLA

The application of immersive technologies aligns closely with interactionist theories of SLA, which emphasize the importance of meaningful communication in language development (Swain & Lapkin, 1998). VR/AR platforms facilitate interaction-rich environments where learners engage in real-time negotiation of meaning, context-sensitive vocabulary use, and multimodal comprehension. Such conditions reflect Genesee's (1994) argument for content-based language immersion, where language is acquired more effectively when embedded in purposeful and contextualized tasks.

The integration of experiential learning theory (Kolb, 2014) further explains why immersive approaches yield higher engagement and deeper learning. Learners in VR/AR environments do not passively absorb information; they actively participate, reflect, and adapt through feedback loops, mirroring Kolb's experiential learning cycle. Similarly, multisensory learning theory (Shams & Seitz, 2008) provides cognitive support for the idea that combining auditory, visual, and kinesthetic elements can enhance both retention and comprehension, particularly for vocabulary and pronunciation tasks.

4.2. Pedagogical Implications

For educators, the practical benefits of immersive-gamified tools are manifold. First, these environments create low-stakes, high-engagement conditions, which are crucial for reducing foreign language anxiety—a known barrier to performance. The ability to practice conversations with avatars or in virtual settings before facing real-world scenarios boosts learners' confidence and willingness to take risks.

Second, immersive learning supports task-based language teaching (TBLT) methodologies by embedding language practice in meaningful scenarios—such as navigating an airport or solving a mystery in the target language. As shown by De Freitas et al. (2010), narrative-based game structures in VR settings facilitate not just vocabulary acquisition, but also the development of critical thinking, problem-solving, and socio-pragmatic competence.

Third, the adaptive and personalized nature of many VR/AR systems supports differentiated instruction, allowing teachers to accommodate various learning styles and proficiency levels. Tools informed by Xie et al. (2019) and Parmaxi (2023) demonstrate how learning analytics and AI-based scaffolding can tailor experiences in real-time, maximizing learner autonomy.

Nevertheless, the successful implementation of these approaches depends heavily on instructional design quality, teacher training, and alignment with curricular goals. As Billinghurst (2002) and Kesim & Ozarslan (2012) noted, poorly designed or contextually irrelevant immersive activities can lead to cognitive overload or disengagement.

4.3. Challenges and Limitations

Despite their promise, several barriers hinder the wide-scale adoption of immersive and gamified language learning:

- Cost and Infrastructure: High-end VR systems and AR-capable devices remain financially inaccessible for many institutions, particularly in under-resourced settings. Even mobile-based AR tools require reliable internet and device compatibility, creating equity concerns.
- Teacher Preparedness: Many educators lack formal training in designing or facilitating immersive experiences. Without professional development, even the most sophisticated tools risk underuse or misuse (Wu et al., 2013).
- Content Relevance and Localization: Much of the current immersive content is designed with Western cultural contexts in mind, making adaptation necessary for diverse learner populations.
- Technological Fatigue: Prolonged exposure to digital environments, especially VR, can lead to eye strain, motion sickness, or cognitive fatigue, requiring careful moderation and user-centered design (Suh & Prophet, 2018).

4.4. Future Research Directions

Given the emerging nature of this field, there is a pressing need for longitudinal, mixed-methods research that evaluates the sustained impact of immersive-gamified learning on language proficiency, particularly across age groups, linguistic backgrounds, and learning contexts.

Key future research areas include:

1. Effectiveness vs. novelty effect: Determining whether observed improvements stem from pedagogical merit or short-term enthusiasm.
2. Cross-cultural adaptability: Investigating how immersive content can be localized without losing effectiveness.
3. AI integration: Exploring the synergy between immersive technologies and adaptive AI in personalizing learning trajectories.
4. Teacher training models: Developing scalable frameworks for preparing educators to integrate immersive technologies effectively.
5. Ethical and accessibility considerations: Addressing digital equity and ensuring inclusive design for learners with disabilities.

By addressing these gaps, future studies can move beyond pilot implementations and contribute to a robust, evidence-based foundation for immersive and gamified language education.

5. Conclusion

The integration of immersive technologies and gamification into language learning marks a transformative development in second language acquisition. As this conceptual synthesis demonstrates, VR and AR environments—when aligned with game-based elements and sound pedagogical principles—offer rich opportunities for learner engagement, interaction, and personal growth. By situating language practice in authentic, emotionally engaging contexts, immersive technologies support experiential and multisensory learning, encouraging deeper comprehension and retention.

The reviewed literature consistently highlights several key affordances: heightened motivation, increased communicative competence, enhanced cognitive engagement, and growing potential for personalized instruction through real-time data and AI integration. These findings underscore that immersive and gamified approaches are not merely educational novelties but tools with tangible pedagogical value.

However, the path toward widespread implementation is not without its challenges. Issues related to cost, technological access, teacher training, and cognitive overload demand thoughtful planning, institutional support, and further empirical exploration. As immersive learning becomes increasingly mainstream, a shift from experimental to evidence-based, scalable practice is crucial.

Educators are encouraged to explore VR/AR-enhanced language tasks that are purpose-driven, culturally relevant, and developmentally appropriate. Institutions must invest not only in infrastructure but also in the professional development of instructors who will lead the integration of these tools into curricula.

Looking ahead, future research should focus on longitudinal outcomes, cross-cultural design, and the ethical implications of immersive technologies in education. Interdisciplinary collaborations between educators, technologists, and linguists will be key to refining these tools and ensuring that their benefits are inclusive and sustainable.

In sum, immersive and gamified methods—when grounded in theory and applied with care—represent a forward-looking approach to language learning. They honor the complexity of language acquisition while embracing the capabilities of 21st-century innovation. As digital fluency becomes a core component of educational success, the thoughtful integration of VR/AR and gamification into language instruction may well redefine what it means to "learn a language" in the modern age.

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