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GAMIFICATION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AT TECHNICAL UNIVERSITIES: ENHANCING MOTIVATION AND COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

M.B. Allanyazov
Associate Professor, Tashkent University
of Architecture and Civil Engineering, Tashkent

Abstract. This article examines the application of gamification strategies in English language teaching at technical universities. It analyses effective approaches to enhancing student motivation and developing communicative competence through the integration of competitive elements, reward systems, and game mechanics into language instruction. The study discusses practical experience with digital platforms such as Kahoot, Quizlet, and Duolingo, as well as the broader impact of gamification on conventional classroom practice.

Keywords: gamification, English language teaching, technical university, motivation, communicative competence, digital platforms, game mechanics.

Introduction

English language proficiency has become an indispensable component of professional competence for graduates of technical universities. In a globalised economy driven by international scientific collaboration, cross-border engineering projects, and multilingual digital communication, the ability to read technical documentation, participate in professional discourse, and present research findings in English is no longer optional but essential. Yet educators at technical institutions across the Commonwealth of Independent States consistently report a paradox: students recognise the importance of English for their careers, but classroom engagement remains persistently low. This motivational deficit is well documented in the literature on foreign language learning in non-language university contexts. Students whose primary academic identity is formed around engineering, architecture, or information technology frequently perceive English classes as peripheral to their professional formation — a compulsory hurdle rather than a meaningful component of their education. Traditional instructional approaches centred on grammar drills, vocabulary memorisation, and text translation do little to challenge this perception. Gamification — the application of game design principles and mechanics to non-game contexts — has emerged as a promising pedagogical response to this challenge. By incorporating elements such as points, leaderboards, badges, timed challenges, and narrative progression into language instruction, gamification transforms routine learning tasks into engaging, goal-oriented experiences. The present article investigates the theoretical basis, practical implementation, and educational outcomes of gamification in English language classes at technical universities, with particular attention to the affordances of contemporary digital platforms.

Literature Review

The concept of gamification was first systematically theorised by Deterding et al. (2011), who defined it as the use of game design elements in non-game contexts with the aim of motivating and engaging users. Within educational research, gamification quickly attracted significant attention as a potential solution to declining student engagement in formal learning environments. Hamari, Koivisto, and Sarsa (2014) conducted a comprehensive review of empirical gamification studies

and found that the majority reported positive effects on motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes, though they cautioned that context and implementation quality are decisive factors. In the field of language education, Deters et al. (2015) and Reinhardt (2019) have examined how game-based and gamified approaches can create low-anxiety communicative environments in which learners take greater risks with language production. The competitive and playful framing of tasks reduces the social stakes of error, encouraging students to attempt linguistic forms they might otherwise avoid for fear of public failure. This effect is particularly relevant in technical university contexts, where students tend to exhibit high perfectionism and low tolerance for public linguistic error. Research specifically addressing gamification in English for Specific Purposes and English for Academic Purposes instruction is growing rapidly. Flores (2015) investigated the use of Duolingo in a university ESP course and found significant gains in vocabulary retention and learner persistence compared to traditional homework assignments. Licorish et al. (2018) examined Kahoot-based quiz activities across multiple disciplines and reported consistent improvements in student attention, participation, and self-reported enjoyment. Importantly, both studies noted that gamification is most effective when aligned with clear learning objectives and embedded in a coherent instructional sequence rather than used as isolated entertainment.

Methodology

The present study draws on a qualitative descriptive methodology combining a review of current research literature with reflective analysis of classroom practice at a technical university in Uzbekistan. Over the course of two academic semesters, gamification elements were systematically integrated into English for Professional Purposes courses serving students from engineering, information technology, and architecture programmes at bachelor's level. Three categories of gamification intervention were implemented. The first category comprised digital platform-based activities: Kahoot quizzes were used for vocabulary and grammar review at the start and end of lessons; Quizlet flashcard sets were assigned for independent vocabulary consolidation, with class leaderboards tracking study streaks; and Duolingo for Schools was introduced as a supplementary out-of-class activity with weekly progress monitoring. The second category involved classroom game mechanics applied to communicative tasks: role-play scenarios were structured as team challenges with point systems, oral presentation activities incorporated peer voting for linguistic accuracy and content clarity, and vocabulary relay races were used to activate technical terminology in a competitive format. The third category consisted of narrative progression elements: a semester-long scenario was developed in which student teams acted as international consulting engineers tasked with presenting proposals to a fictional client, accumulating points and advancing through project stages as they completed language tasks. Effectiveness was assessed through pre- and post-intervention motivation questionnaires adapted from the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ), analysis of participation rates in gamified versus conventional lessons, and comparison of vocabulary test scores across the two semester groups.

Results

The findings across all three categories of intervention were consistently positive. Motivation questionnaire data showed a statistically meaningful increase in intrinsic motivation scores following the gamified semester, with students reporting higher levels of task enjoyment, greater sense of personal progress, and stronger willingness to invest effort in language study. The sharpest gains were recorded among students from engineering programmes, who had reported the lowest baseline motivation at the start of the year. Participation rates in gamified lessons were substantially higher than in conventional instruction. Voluntary oral contributions during Kahoot-integrated sessions averaged more than three times the rate observed during standard question-and-

answer activities. Team-based role-play challenges generated sustained peer interaction in English for periods of fifteen to twenty minutes — considerably longer than the typical student speaking time achievable through teacher-fronted instruction. These results suggest that competitive and collaborative game structures create social conditions that naturally elicit greater language production. Vocabulary retention data further supported the value of the gamified approach. Students who used Quizlet consistently across the semester scored an average of 31% higher on end-of-term technical vocabulary tests than those who relied on traditional review methods. Analysis of Duolingo usage logs revealed that the competitive streak mechanic was a significant driver of continued engagement, with students returning to the platform voluntarily on days without scheduled English classes.

Discussion

The results confirm that gamification, when thoughtfully designed and aligned with clear language learning objectives, can substantially improve both the motivational and linguistic outcomes of English instruction in technical university settings. The key mechanism appears to be the transformation of language tasks from externally imposed obligations into internally meaningful challenges. When students experience progress, recognition, and healthy competition, they develop a relationship with language learning that is driven by personal investment rather than institutional requirement. However, the study also identified important limitations and implementation challenges. Gamification is not uniformly beneficial across all student profiles. A minority of students — particularly those with strong introversion or high competitive anxiety — reported feeling uncomfortable in highly competitive gamified environments. This finding underscores the importance of offering diverse gamification formats that include both competitive and collaborative mechanics, ensuring that no learner is systematically disadvantaged by the design of the learning environment. A further challenge concerns the sustainability of the novelty effect. Research by Hanus and Fox (2015) has documented that gamification sometimes produces initial engagement gains that diminish over time as the novelty of game elements fades. Preventing this decay requires continuous renewal of gamification content, periodic introduction of new mechanics, and careful calibration of challenge levels to maintain the optimal zone of proximal development. This demands ongoing creative effort from instructors and argues strongly for institutionalised support for gamification design as part of teacher professional development programmes. Finally, it is essential to emphasise that gamification functions as a motivational amplifier rather than a substitute for sound pedagogical design. The quality of the language content, the clarity of learning objectives, and the appropriateness of feedback mechanisms remain the primary determinants of learning outcomes. Gamification enhances these processes; it cannot compensate for their absence.

Conclusion

Gamification offers technical university English language educators a powerful and flexible toolkit for addressing the persistent motivational challenges that characterise foreign language instruction in professional higher education. By harnessing the psychological mechanisms of reward, competition, narrative, and progress visualisation, gamified instruction creates learning environments in which students engage more deeply, produce more language, and retain vocabulary more effectively.

Successful implementation requires deliberate pedagogical design that aligns game mechanics with language learning goals, attends to the diversity of learner profiles, and sustains engagement through varied and progressively challenging activities. As digital platforms continue to expand the gamification toolkit available to language educators, the potential of this approach to transform

English language teaching at technical universities across Uzbekistan and the broader region deserves serious institutional attention and continued empirical investigation.

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