Secondary Public-School Teachers' Perceptions of Gamification in ESL Instruction: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore teachers' perceptions of the efficiency of gamification, which is known to spark students' engagement and result in better learning at secondary schools. Gamification may play an integral role in Pakistan's education system which includes English as a Second Language (ESL). Using a qualitative research design and phenomenological approach, data was collected via semi-structured interviews with 28 secondary public-school ESL teachers, experienced with gamified instruction. Thematic analysis revealed four themes: 1. Gamification made Learning Fun; 2. Popular Gamification Strategies; 3. Improvement in Student Engagement and Learning Outcomes; and 4. Challenges of Using Gamification in ESL Classrooms. The study recommends that public schools in the country must focus on resource prioritization, teacher professional development support, collaborative planning strategies, and differentiated approaches to cater to students with differing levels of digital tool knowledge.

Keywords: ESL instruction, Secondary school level, Gamification, Student motivation.

INTRODUCTION

The globalized world requires English language proficiency to meet its demands (Shamim, 2008). English has a central function in the fields of education and career paths, as it is used as a common medium of communication between individuals of diverse linguistic backgrounds (Akram et al., 2021a). For those who do not speak English as their native language, it provides an opportunity to compete in global markets and participate in the cultural conversations of the world. Since English is the official working language in Pakistan and has been widely used for a long period of time as the language medium in government, law, and education increases its significance for the country. It is also a compulsory subject in the National Curriculum of Secondary Education Level in Pakistan (Malik & Pervaiz, 2023).

Despite the importance of English, traditional English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction methods in Pakistan have not been effective due to problems such as lack of engagement and motivation among students (Akram et al., 2020). This is why educators are exploring new methods to improve learning outcomes. Gamification is an example of a method to foster such engagement and motivation in a learning setting by injecting game-like features into the learning ecosystem (Akram & Abdelrady, 2023). In different educational settings, gamification has emerged as an important tool for active learning, retention, and motivation of the students (Wang, 2023). The use of gamification in teaching ESL is congruent with the educational policies of Pakistan to move teaching practices beyond the traditional classroom settings and enhance language acquisition for the students (Akram & Yang, 2021). The National Education Policy emphasizes the use of innovative pedagogies for responding to diversity among learners as well as bringing together traditional and modern modes of education (Akram, 2020). Using gamified environments, as part of the ESL lesson plans, teachers can bring fresh and engaging classroom atmospheres that meet the needs and learning styles of contemporary students.

This study aimed to investigate the perceptions of teachers about the gamification of ESL teaching and learning at the secondary school level in Pakistan. Understanding the attitude and experiences of teachers towards gamification is integral because their approval and successful use of this method can have a great impact on its success and inform suggestions for improvements in the education sector or administration. This research will help offer a wider appreciation of gamification in the field by looking at the pros and cons as well as pragmatic aspects to deal with and to make more informed policy decisions for better ESL teaching practices in Pakistan. The main research question of the study is: How do ESL secondary school teachers perceive the effectiveness of gamification for student engagement and learning outcomes in the ESL classroom?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The term "gamification," which refers to the incorporation of game mechanics into non-game settings, did not gain traction until the middle of 2010 (Seaborn & Fels, 2015). Gamification was rethought by Wood and Reiners (2015), who described it as an approach to elevating actions that are not games to the level of a game. According to Huang and Soman (2013), gamification may also be defined as the implementation of game design components such as points, leaderboards, and badges in a non-game context to create a learning experience that is similar to that of learning a game. According to Çeker and Özdaml (2017), the concept of gamification encompasses more than just the use of game mechanics and aspects to enhance the level of engagement in learning. It encompasses the concept of enhancing learners' engagement, developing interactive learning environments, and granting students the ability to achieve learning autonomy. As stated by Sailer and Homner (2020), the use of badges, awards, cumulative scores, and competition scores appears to serve as visible incentives for students and the behaviors that are required of them in the educational setting.

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In addition, Woodcock and Johnson (2018) suggest that the design of a gamified learning environment should incorporate three separate concepts: dynamics, mechanics, and components. The term "game dynamics" encompasses a variety of concepts, including but not limited to status, reward, self-expression, competition under rules that are stated and enforced, and achievement. Level-system, narrative context, challenge, achievements, and leaderboards are all examples of game mechanics (Kim, 2015; Huang & Soman, 2013). Game mechanics also include other similar concepts. The components or parts of a game include self-representation through avatars, feedback, points, trophies, badges, a progress bar, and virtual presents, among other things (Marache-Francisco & Brangier, 2013). All of these components are designed to stimulate feelings of interest, competitiveness, curiosity, and inspiration in the participants, as well as to convince them to change their habits, and to make the process of learning easier for them through the usage of a gamification application. As a result of the fact that gamification is simple to implement on portable mobile devices and is frequently used in digital environments, the focus of this study is on digital gamification (Hamari & Koivisto, 2015).

Over the past few years, there has been a notable rise in application of digital gamification in the learning and teaching of English as a Foreign Language (Akram & Abdelrady, 2023; Zeybek & Saygı, 2024). Subjects that are becoming increasingly significant include ways to increase students' English hearing, speaking, reading, and writing abilities (Hashim et al., 2019; Zhang & Hasim, 2023). This is needed because non-native English speakers of Pakistan face additional hurdles compared to native English speakers. There is a growing variety of learning contexts that are creating new opportunities for language learners in the twenty-first century with the help of technology. These contexts include "social media contexts, gaming platforms, collaborative- and telecollaborative-based projects, and numerous mashups" (Anak Yunus & Hua, 2021). According to Rahmani (2020), gaming is becoming an

increasingly popular domain. It has been considered that the use of gamification in education is an emerging trend (Abdeen & Albiladi, 2021; Çeker & Özdaml, 2017; Le, 2020). Previously, the main motive was to make learning more attractive to the students by adding humor into the learning process. Marache-Francisco & Brangier (2013) argue that a gamified learning environment is superior to just adding comedy to classroom activities, as students can feel engaged and enjoy themselves, receive quick feedback, and gain a sense of achievement.

Several research studies have been conducted on the application of gamification in language learning and teaching (Boudadi & Gutiérrez-Colón, 2020; Ho, 2020). Sixty-four high-quality studies, conducted from January 2000 to August 2020, reported the use of mobile game-based language learning (MGBLL) and non-mobile game-based language learning (NMGBLL). Su et al. (2021) in their study, compared theories of learning languages and aimed to reveal the areas in which gamification can be used in language acquisition. The top genre overall was immersive simulation games and simulation games. This might be because these involved many gameplay elements such as goals which could provide learners with the feeling of success in small steps, and feedback that was immediate and without condemning them or regulating their curiosity. It was also demonstrated that MGBLL studies involved a considerable amount of gamification, which may be associated with the ease of implementation for handheld portable devices. It was also found that games played most often include characteristics of goals or rules, sensory stimulation, and adaptive challenges (Su et al., 2021).

When we say adaptive challenges, we mean that a well-designed game can change the difficulty to match the capabilities of the players so that activities are neither too easy nor too hard for players. Among the students, the most frequent learning outcomes observed were the acquisition of a new language and experiencing positive emotions. Short et al. (2021) provided a comprehensive perspective of the challenges of design, application, and pedagogy in using Duolingo, one of the most popular gamified applications. The outcomes of this study indicated

that there is a favorable association between the use of Duolingo and performance in foreign languages. This includes improvements in academic accomplishment in English, improvements in English vocabulary, improvements in listening abilities, and improvements in English communication skills. Significantly, users emphasized the dynamic and gamified quality of Duolingo's design, and certain aspects were regarded favorably such as badges and streaks, points, and leader boards. However, as the uniqueness and creativity of the gamification aspect vanished, there was less opportunity for collaboration or meaningful learning. It is for this reason that rivalry and repetition are not essential components when it comes to the development of gamified learning activities. Instead, it is important to place priority on aspects such as context, relevant feedback, and collaborative environments.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Sample

The current study utilized a qualitative research design, with a phenomenological approach to investigate teachers' attitudes towards the efficiency of gamification in improving ESL student engagement and performance at the secondary school level. The study used semi-structured interviews with experienced ESL teachers in secondary schools. A total of 28 senior secondary school English teachers were interviewed from government schools in Lahore, Pakistan. Lahore is considered the largest city in the Punjab province of Pakistan, with an estimated population above 15 million. The selection criteria included teachers who had at least three years of experience teaching ESL and had used some form of gamification in their instructions. In this study, purposive sampling was used to select teachers who were able to provide the information needed to answer the research question (Guarte & Barrios, 2006).

Data Collection and Analysis

A semi-structured interview guide was used, and data was collected over two months from January to February 2024. The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 1 hour and were held

face-to-face or via video conferencing, depending on participants' availability and comfort level. We used a thematic content matrix to develop the interview guide, which ensured consistency across interviews and allowed participants sufficient freedom to discuss variations in their experiences. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and transcribed verbatim afterward. Thematic analysis was the method used for data analysis. Firstly, we read the transcripts multiple times to become immersed in the data and performed coding of key statements and phrases or words to identify themes that were significant and repetitive. The majority of the sample (n=28) were between the ages of 23-39 years (71.4%) and were female (54.6%). Only 5 teachers had a postgraduate qualification, and less than half (n= 12) reported having uninterrupted -high-quality access to digital tools.

Ethical Considerations

All participants signed a written informed consent and were communicated the objective of the study. Participation was voluntary with the right to withdraw at any time. Anonymization was ensured by removing identifiable information from the transcripts and final reporting of findings.

RESULTS

The results are structured into four main themes that include: 1. Gamification made Learning Fun; 2. Popular Gamification Strategies; 3. Improvement in Student Engagement and Learning Outcomes; and 4. Challenges of Using Gamification in ESL Classrooms.

Gamification Made Learning Fun

Most of the teachers (23 out of 28) stated that gamification benefited their ESL classes in terms of student engagement and learning outcomes. Gamified activities were seen as making learning more fun, interactive, and engaging, which in turn enhanced students' motivation to participate and learn. When the elements of games were incorporated teachers noted that it got children motivated and resulted in less passivity among students in classrooms, which was the

case without the use of gamification. One teacher shared: "Gamification has changed the vibes in my classroom. The students have more energy, they are excited to participate and not shy anymore to come forward and participate in the new activities".

Popular Gamification Strategies

A very common and popular approach utilized by teachers (24 out of 28) was to incentivize the completion of tasks, improve class participation, and encourage good behavior by giving points or rewards. The implementation of a points-based system to the content added an element of accomplishment and competition for students that made them interact more with the content. Learners were excited to earn points which could later be exchanged for rewards, mostly extra credit, small prizes, and special privileges which made the classroom more alive and fun.

Teachers also gave out badges and certificates for completing certain tasks or showcasing specific competencies. The particular artifacts of accomplishment conveyed to each student a sense of respect and fulfillment which in turn increased their motivation to perform. Teachers reported that the badges were things that students could take pride in, collecting and displaying them with enthusiasm as they worked toward acquiring more. Badges and certificates also promoted a culture of continual learning and enabled students to keep track of their progress.

Another component that helped shape gamification as an aspect of ESL instruction was competitive games. The teachers created groups with a sense of competition, solved trivia questions, and played word games in the classroom. These were excellent for team building and peer interaction as students worked together to reach common goals. The competitive nature of the activities injected another level of fun into what a tedious part of the learning journey for students can be. Another popular gamification technique used by educators was role-playing activities. Teachers got students to repeatedly practice their conversational

English with content that mimicked real life, by doing role-playing scenarios. These were proven to be extremely powerful strategies in helping students improve their speaking and listening skills, as the tasks taught them how to use language appropriately and in an authentic setting. One teacher commented: "Role-playing activities increase students' confidence in their spoken English and generally enhance their communication skills and build their self-esteem."

Improvement in Student Engagement and Learning Outcomes

Most teachers (25 out of 28) believed that gamification made the biggest difference in student engagement. They found more engagement from students, including those who were previously not participating or refusing to participate. The community, team building, and peer group bonding generated by gamification were obvious and contributed to enhanced learning. In terms of learning outcomes, teachers noted improvements across several domains, such as vocabulary acquisition, grammar proficiency, and oral communication skills. They linked these gains to the nature of the games and the interactive processes in gamified activities, which repeated and allowed learners to play with language features. One teacher wrote: "I've honestly seen more improvement in students' vocabulary and oral skills. These game-like activities make learning less scary and more fun for them."

Challenges of Using Gamification in ESL Classrooms

Although some encouraging results were found, teachers reported (24 out of 28) facing substantial problems in the procedure of applying gamified methods to their ESL classrooms. One issue that stood out was a lack of resources for many teachers to obtain the necessary digital tools and resources for developing engaging gamified tasks. They frequently lacked access to the resources necessary to fully implement gamification in their lessons. One teacher mentioned: "I am not happy with the lack of access to computers and tablets and the internet facility for several gamified learning platforms"

Problems with technology only added to the challenges teachers were facing. Technical glitches and problems such as connectivity to the internet often interrupted the delivery of gamified activities, causing frustration on both sides - from teachers who tried to come up with engaging new ways of teaching and their students who were eager not to miss out on anything. These breaks in instruction not only disrupted the flow of the lessons but also undermined the efficacy of the gamification strategies. Teachers talked about planned activities being disrupted by electricity outages, which meant their virtual classrooms were disconnecting them from any semblance of a natural and continuous learning experience.

Another major challenge was managing time. Teachers shared that they struggle to find a balance in time for planning and implementing gaming between their standard curriculum demands. Though planning is always required when designing effective gamified activities-including creating engaging content, integrating digital tools, and developing ways to monitor student progress and rewarding advances. Teaching duties combined with this extra work were voluntary, and it was an imposed burden on many educators. A number of teachers echoed concerns that time restrictions had curtailed their ability to incorporate gamification in a consistent and impactful manner.

Instructors had to face the issue of student disparities as well. Differences in student experience and confidence in using these digital tools made participation and performance uneven at times. Though some students enjoyed attentively learning from a gamified system, it also mattered that they had to know how to work the technology. Others felt shy or lacked confidence to engage in exciting learning games. This was problematic because the unbalanced system as it stood made it difficult for teachers to create equal access to gamified learning experiences. One teacher pointed out: "These differences in student backgrounds and skills require additional attention and focus on the part of the school and adaptations to classrooms to meet the needs of students. But for this we also need time".

In addition, teachers reported the need for professional learning and ongoing support to employ effective gamification strategies in the classroom. Most teachers reported that there was insufficient training to use gamification techniques and digital tools, making it difficult, if not impossible, for these strategies to be utilized at their fullest capacity. The lack of institutionalized training left teachers to deal with the complexities of gamification in isolation, which caused confusion and wide disparities in terms of quality teaching and student learning.

DISCUSSION

This study provides specific insight into how gamification can be used in the ESL classroom in Pakistani public schools or other similar contexts by aligning with the related findings and providing context-based recommendations. Our study finds that gamification is an effective way to create an optimal learning environment, and it encourages ESL learners to feel motivated. These findings are supported by previous research that shows that gamification is an efficient method of making the process of learning more enjoyable and interactive, leading to better student motivation and participation in the learning process (Boudadi & Gutiérrez-Colón, 2020). Akram and Li (2024) also emphasize the importance of active participation in students` learning motivation. In another study on ethnic identity, Dehghanzadeh et al. (2021) found that student enthusiasm and participation improved according to the teachers in this study (Dehghanzadeh et al. 2008). Classroom enjoyment is enhanced with positive learning attitudes and the use of media and technology (Ramzan et al., 2023a; 2023b). More recent studies show that Artificial Intelligence helps in learning languages and teacher feedback increases student engagement (Javaid et al., 2024a; 2024 b).

The findings on the implementation of specific gamification strategies through popular tools such as points and rewards, badges and certificates, competitive games, role-playing activities, and interactive digital platforms are in line with other studies (Nieto-Escamez & Roldán-Tapia, 2021). The benefits of these gamification techniques are that they allow learners

to get feedback at the moment of need and develop a feeling of accomplishment and opportunities for collaborative language use which are important for effective language learning (Akram & Abdelrady, 2023). Other studies show that collaborative strategies used by teachers are effective (Ramzan et al., 2023c), and help in developing student mindfulness, emotional intelligence, and language skills (Javaid et al., 2023a; 2023b). This is important as language challenges can cause stress in students, and support for developing emotional intelligence can result in an increase in self-esteem and better academic performance (Javaid et al., 2024c; 2024d; Ramzan et al., 2023d). The overall findings suggest that ESL students perform better with a variety of games incorporated in teaching methods and this confirms that there is certainly a place for gamification in the ESL classroom.

Though teachers experience improved learning in the classroom due to gamification, the study also shows that there are major obstacles that exist to adopting gamification successfully. The resource constraints, time management issues, students' disparities, and technical problems are aligned with the challenges reported in other studies (Akram et al., 2021b; Akram et al., 2022; Aslam et al., 2021). If these barriers are not taken into consideration, then initial benefits can be nullified, and upscale and continuation of use will not be possible. The findings also confirm previous literature and emphasize the requirement for professional development and ongoing support for teachers to be successful in delivering gamified teaching (Boudadi & Gutiérrez-Colón, 2020; Li and Akram, 2023; Al-Adwan et al., 2022).

Some of the recommendations to overcome these challenges include efforts by schools and educational authorities to allocate resources so that teachers have digital tools and internet support. Building technology infrastructure in Pakistan can address a lot of technical pitfalls in gamified activities. Moreover, comprehensive and continued training must be provided to teachers on how to gamify and go digital. Workshops, seminars, and regular learning are needed to equip teachers with the necessary skills to incorporate game-based learning in their

teaching. Instead of perceiving gamification as a separate factor, stakeholders and the education sector should incorporate it into the regular curriculum to enhance time management efficiency. Teaching the same grade level and subject enables collaboration and shared resources in lesson planning, which helps to reduce individual workload and fosters consistency when implementing gamified activities. While gamification can enhance student engagement and learning outcomes, it should complement rather than replace traditional learning activities. Additional support and alternative activities may be necessary for students who are less familiar with digital tools. Overall, while combining gamification with ESL instruction has potential benefits, the practical challenges identified in this study require further clarification for effective implementation.

Limitations

This study is limited by its focus on teachers' perspectives, potentially excluding student viewpoints on gamification in ESL learning. Additionally, the research was conducted in the public sector, which may limit the generalizability of the findings, thus excluding the experiences and challenges of the private education sector. Future studies should incorporate student perspectives to provide a more holistic view of gamification's impact. Expanding research to other regions and comparing the experiences of public versus private sector teachers is also needed.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study highlights the positive impact of gamification on student engagement and learning outcomes in ESL instruction, as reported by public sector teachers in Pakistan. While gamification enhances motivation and classroom interactivity, challenges such as resource limitations, time management, and varying student digital proficiency hinder its full potential in public schools. Addressing these issues through better resource allocation, teacher training, and differentiated instruction

will help maximize the benefits of gamified learning. The findings of this study have several implications for educational practice in the public sector. First, incorporating gamification into ESL instruction can significantly enhance student engagement and improve learning outcomes, suggesting that schools should consider adopting game-based strategies to make lessons more interactive. Second, educational institutions must address resource limitations by providing teachers with access to digital tools and reliable internet to ensure the smooth execution of gamified activities. Third, professional development programs should be introduced to equip teachers with the necessary skills to implement gamification effectively, reducing the burden of lesson planning and promoting consistency in instructional practices. Finally, differentiated instruction should be emphasized to accommodate varying levels of student familiarity with technology, ensuring that all learners benefit from gamified approaches.

DECLARATION STATEMENTS

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