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## English Language Learning Through Non-Technology Games: A Case Study of International Students at a Lithuanian University

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## English Language Learning Through Non-Technology Games: A Case Study of International Students at a Lithuanian University

### Abstract

Research on gamified language learning often involves the use of digital games. Little is known about the use of non-technology games in promoting language learning despite their accessibility. This paper aims to fill in this lacuna by providing insights into international students' engagement in non-technology gamified English language learning in the context of a Lithuanian university. The research, which used a case study approach as its methodology, involved a total of 30 international students at a Lithuanian university together with their two instructors. They were observed for two weeks, and then interviewed by the researchers. An inductive thematic analysis approach proposed by Braun and Clark was used to analyse the data. The findings revealed that the students' engagement with the non-technology gamified lessons have impacted them positively as they believe that they have improved English language proficiency and better mastery of the 21-st century learning skills. However, the participants raised several issues related to cultural sensitivity and blurred learning outcomes. This study concluded that non-technology games serve as a useful tool in promoting language learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century if it is carefully designed to attract learners' interests and at the same to time meet the learning outcomes. This study is hoped to encourage practitioners to experiment with non-technology gamified lessons and provide guidelines for them in conducting effective non-technology gamified lessons.

### Keywords

gamified language learning, Lithuanian, fun learning, qualitative, collaborative learning

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# **English Language Learning Through Non-Technology Games: A Case Study of International Students at a Lithuanian University**

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Research on gamified language learning often involves the use of digital games. Little is known about the use of non-technology games in promoting language learning despite their accessibility. This paper aims to fill in this lacuna by providing insights into international students' engagement in non-technology gamified English language learning in the context of a Lithuanian university. The research, which used a case study approach as its methodology, involved a total of 30 international students at a Lithuanian university together with their two instructors. They were observed for two weeks, and then interviewed by the researchers. An inductive thematic analysis approach proposed by Braun and Clark was used to analyse the data. The findings revealed that the students' engagement with the non-technology gamified lessons have impacted them positively as they believe that they have improved English language proficiency and better mastery of the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills. However, the participants raised several issues related to cultural sensitivity and blurred learning outcomes. This study concluded that non-technology games serve as a useful tool in promoting language learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century if it is carefully designed to attract learners' interests and at the same time meet the learning outcomes. This study is hoped to encourage practitioners to experiment with non-technology gamified lessons and provide guidelines for them in conducting effective non-technology gamified lessons.

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## **Introduction**

Educators often search for alternative methods and approaches that can be easily implemented to gain positive learning outcomes. Gamification is one of these approaches that may present itself as a useful, cost-effective, and efficient approach for researchers and practitioners to improve learning outcomes (Oprescu et al., 2014; Rowland, 2014). It is defined

as “the implementation of various gaming elements into a non-gaming context to increase user’s participation, motivation and interest for a particular task” (Kuo & Chuang, 2016, p. 16). Game elements such as badges, points leader boards, and avatars encourage learners to achieve greater goal orientation by allowing repetition, increasing persistence, and evoking friendly competition with peers (Ding, 2018). These game elements induce fun, joy, and achievements among learners (Kapp, 2012; Sailer et al., 2017; Wu & Huang, 2017). It fulfils students’ psychological desires and improves their motivation (Deterding, 2012). Also, it empowers learners with low self-efficacy and allows autonomy in learning (Kebritchi et al., 2010). For these reasons many educators have integrated gamification into their pedagogical practices (Chua et al., 2021; Dehganzadeh & Dehganzadeh, 2020; De-Marcos, Garcia-Cabot, & Garcia-Lopez, 2017; Had & Rashid, 2019).

In this study, the researchers focused on non-technology gamified lessons as an approach that may help learners enhance their English language learning. Students often express that English language learning is difficult, challenging, and arduous task, especially in acquiring various skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Akbari, 2015; Hwang et al., 2017). Several studies have highlighted that remembering vocabulary and grammatical aspects in English language learning are tedious learning activities that require students to be physically, mentally, and emotionally involved to acquire the English language successfully (e.g., Annamalai, 2016; Mahzan et al., 2020; Yunus et al., 2016). Some other factors that hinder students from learning a language are anxiety, motivation, and attitudes (Liu, 2017; Rafek et al., 2014). Similar problems were identified with the participants of this study. The participants were international students in a public university in Lithuania whom, according to their instructors, face difficulties in listening, speaking, reading, and writing in the English language. They are less motivated when it comes to English language learning. The English language courses for these students were mainly based on the traditional input-based teaching approach which focuses on what should be covered in their syllabus. It was predominantly instructor-oriented, without much learners’ participation, because the instructors tended to focus on what they should teach in each lecture.

As noted earlier, game-based learning is argued to provide an alternative solution to these problems as it encourages students to interact with their peers in the learning process actively and consequently reduces their anxiety for them to have better attitudes towards learning (see Rashid et al., 2017). The researchers argued that gamified lessons can be effectively utilised to subjugate the challenges and facilitate psychological and emotional adjustment for the Lithuanian international students who participated in this study. Also, there are no specific teaching modules for weak students. Therefore, instructors were motivated to experiment with game-based teaching when they were invited to participate in this study.

This paper mainly discusses the students' and instructors' voices as reflected in their interviews. According to Landers et al. (2015), gamification has an effect through intermediary behaviour or attitude. Therefore, gamified lessons can only be effective if they elicit conducive learning environment. Therefore, it is imperative to examine issues affecting effective teaching and learning practices in the less-explored non-technology gamification so that instructors are well-informed of the issues and able to take necessary actions to ensure the success of the learning process. This research is hoped to contribute to this effort of ensuring effective non-technology gamification in English language learning. The research question of this study is: How do students’ experience English language learning via non-technology gamified lessons?

## **Literature Review**

In the following section, theoretical underpinnings and studies related to gamification in educational context are discussed.

## **Theoretical Underpinnings: Constructivism**

This study is situated in the broad framework of constructivism. Constructivist learning theory is developed based on the premise that learners actively construct or create their own knowledge, and this is influenced by their experiences as a learner (Hein, 1991). In simple words, it proposes that learners are not a passive agent but an active individual who makes sense of their learning experience in generating knowledge. This study is carried out based on this principle in the sense that students should be actively engaged in the (non-technology) gamified lessons so that they have a meaningful learning experience instead of being a passive learner who suffers from one-way communication in the classroom.

There are four main tenets of constructivism, which directly support the need of gamified lessons explored in this study (see Feyzi Behnagh, & Yasrebi, 2020). Firstly, knowledge is constructed. Students make meaning in their own unique way based on their prior knowledge, experiences, beliefs, and insights. By engaging them in gamified lessons where each of them has their own roles to play, students will construct knowledge relevant to them. Secondly, learning is an active process. Students need to do something to learn as learning is not a passive activity. Gamified lessons afford the “activeness” as students are engaged in teamwork, discussion, and reading as they go through the lesson. Thirdly, learning is a social activity. Learners learn through their connection with other learners. Gamified lessons which require interaction not only with team members but also the opponents afford the social interaction for learning. Finally, motivation is key to learning. Students will only learn if they are motivated. Gamified lessons are carried out to motivate students to learn due to its potential to create an enjoyable learning environment.

### ***Gamification in Educational Context***

In the education context, gamified lessons have been increasingly viewed as a promising tool to kindle students' learning motivation and their active role in learning. Researchers and practitioners have integrated gamified lessons in various disciplines between gaming missions and learning tasks. For example, the gamification approach was embedded in a digital tutorial learning system, and the system was implemented in a college-level course (Li et al., 2014). The authors found that the gamification approach positively affected student performance, motivation, and knowledge transformation. A quantitative study by Su and Cheng (2015) investigated how gamification affects science learning, motivation, and achievement in a mobile learning environment. The survey reported that the learners involved in the gamification lessons had a higher degree of motivation compared to traditional instruction. Further, Landers and Landers (2014) conducted experimental research by assigning students to complete their online wiki-based project to a gamified version with a leader board and the control group without a leader board. The study concluded that a leader board could be utilized to improve course performance.

Narrowing down to the English language learning context, Liu, Holden, and Zheng (2016) examined the use of mobile technology game in language education. They developed Guardians of the Mo'o an augmented reality mobile game to enhance learners' language learning and cultural understanding. The study reported that students using mobile technology and gamified lessons resulted in dynamic learning experiences. Further, Hung (2018) integrated flipped classroom approach with gamified lessons to nurture learner engagement. The findings suggest that the approach is a worthwhile attempt for English language learners to increase their confidence and motivation when engaged in classroom activities. Li and Samuel (2021) investigated gamified reading and reported on learners' deep engagement,

increased motivation, and improved reading abilities. The study further found that such a positive effect can be sustained for several semesters.

A systematic review was conducted by Short et al. (2021) to summarize the various methods, research samples, frameworks and settings using gamification particularly Duolingo in English language learning. The study found that from the year 2012-2020 studies were more focused on quantitative studies compared to qualitative studies. Also, priority is given to the tools and less attention is given to the process of language learning.

Based on the review above, gamification seems to motivate, engage, and solve problems related to learning. It seems to influence learners' behaviour and commitment. While this approach has been gaining momentum in research and practical use in the recent years, researchers still debate on the necessity and the value of gamification. For example, Dehganzadeh et al. (2019) acknowledged that gamification results in positive learning outcomes, however, most research on gamification on learners' characteristics and learning is still under researched. Similarly, Rapp (2014) has urged scholars to focus on qualitative studies to inspect users' experience in gamified applications from the users' point of view.

For these reasons, this study represents an effort to provide a depth investigation on how students' experience the actual implementation of gamified lessons and pointing out the benefits and weaknesses. Qualitative research permits in-depth investigation of the underlying issues and reasons for the occurrence of certain behaviour resulting in a comprehensive understanding of the deeper experience of individuals (Willig, 2013).

Furthermore, most of the studies reviewed above are mediated by technology tools and little is known about non-technology gamification. Thus, non-technology gamification is required in learning a language to provide students the face-to-face interactive environment and the researchers believe that this can be achieved with creative gamified lessons designed in this study. Shy and reluctant learners often react positively to non-technology gamified lessons. It allows them to get rid of inhibitions and speak the language, which is difficult to achieve in technology gamified lessons. They were able to speak to their team members and share their ideas and intentions.

**Self of the Researchers.** As an English language instructor, we hope to contribute to the effective language learning via non-technology gamification. We are aware of the emphasis given to technology-based gamification in the 21<sup>st</sup> century pedagogy guidelines to the extent that non-technology gamification is not given enough attention it deserves. Whilst we are not against technology-based gamification, we argue that this kind of gamification does not cater for the larger group of students especially those with limited access to technology and the Internet. In addition, technology-based gamification requires extra preparation from the instructors which often cannot be done due to various limitations such as time constraint, and limited sources and skills. We also believe that teaching approaches should be made varied, thus non-technology gamification should be promoted along with technology-based gamification. It is with these awareness and principles that we carried out this research.

### **Methodology**

A case study was adopted due to the "rationally empowering nature" (Yin, 2009, p. 83) and the aim for "thick descriptions" of the phenomenon being studied (Merriam, 1998, p. 29). It is an "intensive holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon" (Merriam, 1998, p. xiii). The phenomenon here is a group of international students at a Lithuanian university engaging in non-technology gamification for language learning. Intensive holistic description in this study refers to the detailed explanation of the participants, research site, various methods

and describing the activities, probing deeply, analyse the activity intensively and providing evidence as illustrated in data analysis, discussion, and findings.

### Context of the Study

The study was carried in a Lithuanian university. The gamified lessons were integrated into a six-hour credit professional Foreign Language (English language) for the undergraduate programme. The course is required for graduation. While the main aim of the course is to prepare students for listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, it also intends to facilitate and develop their critical thinking abilities. The study was carried out for two weeks during the Erasmus Staff Mobility programme in 2019. The topics covered during the gamified lessons were related to social issues, traveling, and places of interest.

### Research Design

An interpretative case study is carried out to understand the event (i.e., gamification) from the individual's experience (i.e., interview & observation; Reeves & Hedberg, 2003) and to "be true to the nature of the phenomena under study" and further "to tell it like it is" (Norris & Walker, 2005, p. 132). The interest is in the process as well as the outcomes of the study as the researchers are keen on discovering and interpreting rather than merely testing hypothesis.

The principles above underlie this interpretive study where the researchers employed constructivist learning theory to encourage students to learn English via interaction in a fun and exciting way to reduce anxiety and be more confident, providing a safe and conducive environment for learning. Secondly, students were interviewed to arrive at a detailed and comprehensive description of the use of the gamified lessons, which further allowed the researchers to generate meaning.

Ethical guidelines were carefully considered in this research. Prior to embarking on this study, the participants were briefed on the nature of the study. A consent form explaining the aims, the potential benefits of being involved in this study were given to the students. The consent also made clear that there was no risk in taking part in the study. The possible risk that was avoided in this study was discomfort or embarrassing questions or questions that affected their emotional well-being (Nuby, Rashid, & Hasan, 2019).

### Participants and Sampling

A total of 30 students and two instructors were selected using purposive sampling. The participants were registered for the English language course in the university where the Erasmus program was conducted. The principle of data saturation point helped in deciding the number of participants for the study (van Manen, 2017). A total of 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted based on theoretical saturation which took place when new themes stopped emerging from the interview data (Parker & Northcott, 2016).

**Table 1**  
*Demographic Characteristic of Respondents*

Students	Country	Age	Gender	Semester	Programme
S1	South Korea	27	male	2	Psychology
S2	Georgia	20	male	2	Psychology
S3	Pakistan	24	male	2	Psychology
S4	Lithuania	19	male	2	Psychology
S5	Lithuania	20	male	2	Psychology

<b>S6</b>	Turkey	22	male	2	Psychology
<b>S7</b>	Turkey	25	male	2	Psychology
<b>S8</b>	Malawi	25	female	2	International and Intercultural Communication
<b>S9</b>	Lithuania	20	male	2	Communication and Digital Marketing
<b>S10</b>	Nigeria	23	male	2	International and Intercultural Communication
<b>S11</b>	Malawi	26	female	2	International and Intercultural Communication
<b>S12</b>	Ghana	21	male	2	International and Intercultural Communication
<b>S13</b>	Lithuania	20	male	2	Communication and Digital Marketing
<b>S14</b>	Lithuania	21	female	2	Communication and Digital Marketing
<b>S15</b>	Lithuania	20	female	2	Communication and Digital Marketing
<b>S16</b>	Lithuania	20	male	2	Communication and Digital Marketing

Interviews were also conducted with two instructors who were involved in conducting the gamified lessons. The two instructors were teaching English courses for undergraduate students from Social Science faculties for the past five years, and they were willing to experiment with the “new” approach of teaching and learning, (i.e., gamification with their students during their English lessons because gamification was not a form of teaching and learning that they have experimented in their lessons).

## **Research Instruments**

### **Semi-Structured Interview**

The researchers recorded the semi-structured interview sessions and transcribed them verbatim. The semi-structured interview allowed discussion rather than straight forward answers. Such a practice preserves the information which is available for use at any time (Merriam, 1998). The duration of each interview was 30-40 minutes. To avoid participants’ uneasiness with the information being recorded, the researcher assured them of its confidentiality. The interviews were carried out in a secured, comfortable, and confidential room (Neuman, 2004). All recordings were transcribed for analysis.

The following practices suggested by Gay et al. (2006, p. 420) were considered for the interview:



- i. Listen more and talk less as listening is the most important part of interviewing
- ii. Follow up on what participants say and ask questions to clarify understanding
- iii. Avoid leading questions
- iv. Avoid frequent interruptions
- v. Keep participants focused and ask for concrete details
- vi. Tolerate silence as it means the participants are thinking
- vii. Not being judgmental about participants' views or beliefs; keep a neutral demeanor.
- viii. Not debating with participants over their responses.

### Data Analysis

Inductive thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006) was employed to identify, analyse, interpret, and report the answers to open-ended questions asked. The six steps of thematic analysis are: (1) becoming familiar with the data and transcribing all data, (2) generating codes, (3) classifying codes into themes, (4) reviewing and refining themes, (5) concisely defining and naming themes, (6) producing a report from the emerging themes which is descriptive, analytical and argumentative narrative. Table 1 illustrates the sample schema to code and analyse the data.

Examples/ Excerpts of Data	Analyses (Comment)	Theme
<p><i>“It improves listening, speaking, and writing too, first of all, we need to understand the instructions [...] introduce our ideas in speaking or writing, so having this type of lectures [Lecturers conducting gamified lessons] is beneficial for all students.</i> (S5)</p> <p><i>“It’s a good practice for my vocabulary and I guess reading, listening speaking always helps(S7)</i></p>	<p>S5 highlighting the advantages of gamification in English language learning and connecting to improving the English language skills particularly listening, speaking reading and writing</p> <p>S7 explains that gamification enhances vocabulary as well as listening speaking reading.</p> <p>Conclusion Based on the data, gamification has enhanced vocabulary and their listening speaking, reading, and writing skills</p>	<p>Gamification has fostered their learning experiences and enhanced their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. The activities have also enhanced their vocabulary. All these can be grouped under the common theme <b>Enhance English language learning</b></p>

Direct quotations from the participants were included to explain key themes. Two coders coded the data separately to ensure reliability. A third coder was employed as a ‘tie breaker’ if necessary. Miles and Huberman inter-rater reliability were employed. The first author and the second author independently engaged in separate analysis to identify the emerging themes. An agreement of 85% was achieved. The differences in opinion were solved via discussion. Data

collected from interviews were analysed and presented as S1, S2, S3... and the instructors' data were presented as T1 and T2.

### **Observation**

According to Merriam (1998), collecting data via observation notes very much depends on the purpose of the research. The observation in this present study explored students' experiences of gamification in English language learning. The observation during the four gamified lessons was guided by DeWalt, DeWalt, and Wayland's (1998) suggestions: (a) identifying what had happened and why, (b) examining events occurred from a variety of viewpoints and, (c) identifying behaviours that exemplified the purposes of the observation. These observations were concerned with students' reactions during the gamified lessons. Data captured using observation were analysed and presented as O1, O2 and O3.

### **Trustworthiness of Qualitative Data**

The four criteria for qualitative research suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1994) were considered in this study: confirmability, credibility, dependability, and transferability. Credibility was achieved via data triangulation. The researchers' written observations were undertaken to help further understand students' positive and negative experiences (interviews). The second level of triangulation is investigator triangulation. In this study, the interviews coded for emerging themes were triangulated by three experienced researchers in qualitative research. They reached 85% of agreement among the coders. Hence, the findings are more likely to be convincing, reliable, and accurately reflecting the real situation. The notion of credibility was also addressed by using member checking to establish accuracy in the findings (Creswell, 2008). The interview transcript was returned to the students and teacher to determine whether the information provided during the interview is the same as the information in the transcripts. The interview questions were also validated by a panel of experts in the field of gamification studies and educational research.

In ascertaining the findings of this study could be applied to other contexts (i.e., transferability; Merriam, 1998), the researchers have detailed description of participants, settings, method, data collection, instruments, procedure and findings; such thick descriptions would facilitate other studies to match the situation (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

In this study, the internal consistency of the research instruments (interview and observation) was obtained when one coder agreed to the judgement of another coder. The three coders have been researching and teaching English at university for more than 10 years. There were two coders and a third coder as the tiebreaker. The two primary coders were isolated from each other and coded each set of the transcripts simultaneously. In ensuring confirmability (i.e., the idea of objectivity and neutrality) a colleague was appointed as an external auditor, who carried out an objective assessment of the study throughout the research (Creswell, 2008).

### **Teaching and Learning Procedures**

In week 1, two lecturers taught the gamified lessons in a classroom arranged by the course coordinator. In week 2, students were engaged in the other two gamified lessons (each lesson lasted for two hours). The interviews were conducted on the third week after the students had completed the gamified lessons for two weeks.

The observation notes were taken by the two lecturers and the observer (the main author). The details of the observation are illustrated in the following section.

A variety of interactive activities were incorporated into the lessons to help students. The students worked in pairs and in groups of three. The activities were planned based on their learning outcomes, which entailed participation in conversations and discussions (speaking skills) and writing about various topics in English (writing skills). The principles of Constructivist Learning Theory guided the planning of the gamified lessons. This theory emphasized meaningful interactions and a relaxed atmosphere to comfort the second language learners. Therefore, all the activities are planned for students to work in pairs and small groups for them to interact and express themselves with confidence in a more relaxed atmosphere. The lessons are designed to instil positive interdependence, accountability, and group processing as suggested by the cooperative learning principles (Johnson & Johnson, 1999).

**Table 2**  
*Gamified Lessons*

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Gamified lessons</b>	<b>Learning Activity</b>	<b>Materials</b>
<b>Placing pieces of paper between different body parts</b>	Students are to work in small groups. They are to place as many pieces of papers as possible between different body parts. In this activity, they need to instruct their friends, negotiate ideas, and collaborate to place as many pieces of paper as possible between different body parts. The group that successfully placed the most pieces of paper will be the winner.	Students are to speak individually on their experiences in carrying out the activity, using correct vocabulary, tenses and sentence structures.	Papers and participants
<b>Eiffel Tower construction</b>	Students in a small group need to build an Eiffel tower. Any material found in the classroom can be used to build the Eiffel tower. The group with the highest Eiffel tower will be given the most marks	Students have to speak in front of the class on the materials used and why they used such materials to build the Eiffel tower. Furthermore, they have to speak on the challenges faced in building the Eiffel tower	Any materials found in the classroom.
<b>Guided drawing</b>	Students work in pairs. One is blindfolded and the other is given a picture. The participant with the	Students need to write a factual text based on the picture given to them, using correct sentences, grammar and tenses	Picture, paper and a pencil

	picture needs to guide the blindfolded participant to draw the picture.		
<b>Model costume design</b>	Students work in pairs. One is a designer and the other is a model. They are given newspapers. They have to design a paper costume and place it on the model.	Students need to write a text on how they designed their costume in their past and in the future tense on where the model will best go in a boutique.	Newspapers, a stapler and glue

The present study integrated group work to facilitate interactions among the students. At the end of each activity, students were given points for their activities (both individual and group) and also for their accuracy in speaking and writing skills. The marks are in the form of colour stickers and these stickers can be changed with gifts.

### Findings

Data obtained from interviews and observations indicate two main themes of the learners' engagement in gamified lessons. They were (i) enhancing English language learning and (ii) developing 21<sup>st</sup>-century learning skills. Some challenges are also reported which have been presented in this paper as an additional section that places the themes into acceptable perspectives. The interviews with the instructors were not categorized according to separate emerging themes, but they were triangulated with the emerging themes that were found in the students' interviews.

#### Enhancing English Language Learning

Most of the participants are deeply and actively engaged in the gamified lessons, making learning English more exciting and productive. For example, S4 finds gamified lessons as "a good practice" for his vocabulary and helps in his "reading, listening and speaking skills." S6 explains that gamification has fostered real learning experiences and has enhanced his English language learning skills, especially when he needs to "understand the instructions" and express his ideas in speaking or writing. S10 realizes that during the activities, all of them "communicated in English." They were "listening, speaking, reading and writing" during the activities and "this helped me learn English" (S10). S6 further emphasizes and explains that "having this type of lecture are beneficial for all students" and really enhances ones' English language learning because they "have to use more words, talking and cooperating with people. It is something that [they] do not do very open nowadays" (S6).

The conducive learning environment is also evident during the observations. Most students were eager to have such lessons and attempt to speak and write in English during the lessons. T1 affirmed that the learners "individually worked on their scripts by looking for words and sentence structures to present a good work in front of the class." Such activities also occur when they were preparing their speech as "they were interacting with their friends and using their smartphones to find suitable vocabularies" (O2). At the end, the learners "managed to complete their work" and "participated in speaking and writing using English" (O3).

The learners' engagement in learning English is assisted by the fact that gamification is a "useful and enjoyable" technique of learning that elevates boredom in the classroom (S6), leads to an entertaining learning environment (S15), creates fun learning (S5), forges challenging, exciting and competitive activities and learning (S7, S9). S5 appreciates such a learning environment as "there are very few times where university lectures are actually fun, and [they] want to give [their] full attention in the whole lecture" (S5). Learners understand that gamification engaged them and contributed to their meaningful learning, "The whole concept of gamification makes us involved in the activities better compared to traditional ways of teaching. There is a saying that we learn best when we actually do something" (S2).

Our observation of the participants during the gamified lesson shows that the learners are motivated and engaged in the activities. They were laughing, smiling, and discussing to complete the activities. A more exciting learning setting was observed (O1) that involved multiple skills development such as speaking and listening, kinesthetic drawing (O2). They were eagerly looking at the board for their marks and to be the winner for each activity (O3). As a result, learners became more confident, especially during the presentation when they were out to speak individually (O1)

The gamification lessons, which were guided by experiential learning, fosters "learners' deep conceptual understanding" that involves both the mind and body of the learners (Morris, 2019, p. 11) that is, the learners in this study experienced the gamified activities that literally required them to be cognitively and physically active. In many ways, these lessons have expanded the learners' thought processes and simultaneously maximized their English language communication skills with their peers. This is further augmented with the use of authentic materials and learning activities in the gamified lessons that facilitated a "collaborative and entertaining learning experience" (Nofal et al., 2020, p. 3), which bolsters their interest in English language learning and reduces students' anxiety and fear of speaking a foreign language (i.e., English) and simultaneously, provides opportunities for speaking, reading, and writing in English.

### **Developing Learning Skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

The learners in this study acknowledge that they experienced the processes of developing 21st-century learning skills from the gamified lessons. For instance, S10 acknowledges the importance of critical thinking during the lessons. The participant admitted that this has a lot to do with the way the lesson has been planned. It "highly involves critical thinking, like for building the Eiffel tower, we needed to think in 2D and 3D views to achieve the goal. Also, we had to keep in mind the positioning of the elements" (S10). Participants worked together, through interacting, negotiating and applying the best ideas to solve problems and to earn points. They showed that effective teamwork and collaboration involve the willingness to consider other members' ideas, which may mean sacrificing one's ideas, in determining which ideas are best for the team and to collect points. The participants think out of the box to solve problems and explain that "teamwork was much important because one person couldn't be able to mount it, it needed a second hand or more in order to come out with perfect results" (S7).

Also, the same theme is also observed during their activities: "The students engaged in discussion on specific vocabulary and sentence structures that needed to be used in their presentations, and writing" (O1). Also, they searched on the Internet for better sentence structures. They were willing to accept other members' ideas (O2).

When the instructors were asked about the activities, they liked the most she pointed out that:

All the activities were really interesting because they are tailored to change the pace of the class, provide a variety of activities; they were involved in creative development, collaboration and group work. In fact, students were confident when they were out to speak individually. They individually worked on their scripts by looking for words and sentence structures to present good work in front of the class. (T1)

The educator was convinced that:

gamification is really a useful technique in university teaching and learning activities. especially if it is used wisely together with more theoretical studies, it could provide space for creative development, enhanced communication, collaboration, and versatility in the study process. (T2)

### **Challenging Issues**

The challenges identified by the participants during the gamified lessons were classified into cultural sensitiveness and blurred learning outcomes. The participants are from various cultures and religions and one of the participants expressed that "I think it gave me a little discomfort because we had to touch our bodies together during the exercise. I wish we could do the exercise without touching each other so much." Some of the participants were uncomfortable when shoes were used to build the Eiffel tower and suggested:

I think we can use other materials instead of shoes. We're "playing" on shoes, so I think it can be a bit detrimental to our hygiene and things. There are some people who are very sensitive to hygiene. I think that could give them some degree of discomfort.

Two students in the interview expressed their dissatisfaction when it comes to learning outcomes. They expressed their dissatisfaction and demanded that "Everything should be stated clearly such as rules, methods and so on" (P11). P15 emphasized, "...to me personally they gave little work... it was just pure fun." The observation helped the researchers further confirm participants' dissatisfaction as participants were reluctant to take off their shoes to Build the Eiffel tower. Some students preferred giving instructions and preparing the coloured papers during the body parts activity and not want to be touched. Their dislikes during the activities were also mentioned in the lecturers' interview:

Some activities made me feel a bit confused as being a lecturer and participating in the activities with the students I did not feel relaxed during the activities where bodily contact was involved. I also think it might be cultural because in my culture people have a tendency to keep a certain distance while communicating and this distance is bigger in the situations where a more formal interaction is involved. (T1)

The instructor suggested that some of the activities need improvement. For example, "I would improve the Eiffel Tower activity by asking to use some neutral things instead of shoes, because I did not feel comfortable touching the shoes which are not so clean" (T2). Table 3 illustrates the themes and sub-themes of the interviews.

**Table 3**  
*Themes and Sub-Themes of the Gamified Lessons*

Themes	Sub-Themes
Enhancing English language learning	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Joy, excitement and triumph</li> <li>2. Non-threatening authentic educational experience</li> <li>3. Motivating</li> </ol>
Developing learning skills for 21 <sup>st</sup> -century learning	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Creative thinking</li> <li>2. Critical Thinking</li> <li>3. Communication and Collaboration</li> </ol>
Challenging Issues	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Hygiene</li> <li>2. Discomfort in Touching</li> <li>3. Learning outcomes</li> </ol>

### Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that provision of a safe and interactive learning environment during the gamified lessons contribute to English language learning. The connections between 'fun' and 'language learning' were appreciated and there was a positive affirmation that gamified lessons provided an authentic English learning experience. The gamified lessons allowed the participants to be actively and productively involved in the lessons, resulting in total commitment and co-operation. These findings substantiate the claims made by constructivist learning theory, which postulates the need for learners to actively create knowledge via interaction and collaboration. The participants were actively involved in hands-on experience and learning through trial-and-error activities during their non-technology gamified lessons. Nearly all the students highlighted gamified lessons were a valuable means to deliver the lesson content.

The meaningful activities allowed the weak students to be more confident during their face-to-face interaction and while negotiating meaning. According to Hatfield et al. (1992), positive teamwork "can have a beneficial effect on the morale, motivation, and self-image of the members, which significantly affects their learning." Such experience is difficult to achieve in technology-based gamified lessons, which are dependent on the virtual environment. It was observed that the students tried to use the correct vocabulary and sentence structures before their presentations. The current findings provided support for the findings of Li and Samuel (2021), Short et al. (2021), and Hung, (2018) confirming that gamified lessons engage learners and enhance language learning. The adaptive mechanism was also evident when students cooperate to find the best solution to complete their task. Students learn to accept ideas and admit when they are wrong. All in all, students are inspired and self-guided to speak in a language they are learning. Similarly, the unstructured observation (engaging, teamwork, competition and adaptive) was consistent with the interviews' results. Therefore, it is pertinent to establish a learning environment that supports learners, in which students are active, where

critical thinking skills are taken into consideration and where social interactions are supported. These findings are in line with previous studies that gamified lessons emphasize active learning rather than passively receiving information (Zainuddin et al., 2020). In addition, they also reveal that students need to be engaged in learning during gamification through collaboration and communication in groups or as a Community of Practice (CoP; Wenger, 1998).

An emphasis on collaboration and communication is evident in all group work. By incorporating bonding activities, a cohesive environment for communication and collaboration is experienced by the participants.

Participants in this study demonstrated their ability to develop learning skills that are likely critical in the 21st century, such as critical thinking, creative thinking, communication, and collaboration skills (4C's). It gives students greater agility in adapting and innovating ideas to complete their tasks. It is great to see that 21<sup>st</sup>-century learning skills are garnering attention they deserve in gamified lessons. The findings extend evidence that gamification promotes innovative practices and 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills (Zainuddin et al., 2020). Certainly, encouraging students to develop and hone the 4Cs will serve them to be well in personal as well as professional lives. The observation reported that when learners are given the freedom, they embrace curiosity and drive their learning. They can think proactively to solve problems and build a better understanding of ideas and concepts. As a result, students will be able to work autonomously eventually they become independent learners.

Although the present study has provided a snapshot of positive learning outcomes, these findings should be viewed cautiously. Students highlighted that they were not comfortable with activities in which participants expected that participants touch each other. Issues related to hygiene were also raised. One way to address issues of this sort would be to ask students beforehand if they would be comfortable participating in such activities. Furthermore, teachers should intervene at the right time to modify and adapt proposed activities when they detect students may be uncomfortable with the activities. Gamified lessons need to be structured with an awareness of the complex relationships between culture, context and pedagogical practices.

In the study, students pointed out their dissatisfaction related to learning outcomes. Although the students were briefed about the learning outcomes, the students were not able to relate to their work. Therefore, it is suggested that a checklist on learning outcomes is given to each student after an activity. By doing this, students will be able to relate gamified lessons with the learning outcomes. Further, before the class ends teachers should be able to conclude and reinforce the skills that they have acquired during the gamification lessons.

In sum, this study contributes to the growing body of evidence regarding the contribution of gamification in English language learning. There is limited research considering non-technological gamification in relation to English language learning. It is hoped that enthusiastic teachers will be drawn to adopt non-technological gamified lessons in rural and urban schools, as these activities are interesting, effective, and inexpensive.

## **Conclusion**

It appears that bringing gamification into institutions of higher learning is achievable and worthwhile. However, it is not yet easily achievable, and care needs to be exercised if the maximum benefits need to be obtained. Providing positive emotional experiences are substantial for language learning. Such an environment does not need sophisticated devices but innovative pedagogical practices that engage and motivate learners. Preparing students for 21<sup>st</sup>-century learning does not require high development investments and it only needs powerful simulation pedagogical practices for English language learning. These simple tools used in this study allowed students to enhance their language skills without spending time in cumbersome software modules.



The present study was limited due to the short duration of the course and the small size of the study population, which makes generalization to other learning environments difficult. Future research should focus on longitudinal investigations to determine the long-term effects of gamified lessons on student language learning. Another limitation of this study was the lack of assessment of the students' English language learning outcomes to evaluate the effectiveness of the suggested approach. Also, studies should consider conducting tests to assess specific language skills to determine more precisely the pedagogical effect of gamification on English language learning.

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