Exploiting Gamification and Interactive Activities to Achieve Better Students' Engagement in ELT Classes

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Abstract
Students' active engagement and participation in the learning process has always been the most desirable factor in English Language Teaching (ELT) classes. Yet, it remains challenging for educators to engage students and make them participate. This qualitative research addresses the potential for exploiting gamification and interactive activities to achieve improved engagement in ELT classes. The integration of technology in education enables educators to use web-based games and interactive activities in ELT classes to get students' engagement. An analysis of the research done in the related fields proves that games and interactive activities, integrated with technology, can be more effectively used in ELT classes to deliver better outcomes, which include enhanced motivation, active engagement, and willing participation of learners in the learning process. Another observation is that the current scenario has reinforced the need for using gamification and interactive activities in online classes. For instance, pedagogical applications like Forum (Moodle), Nearpod, Kahoot!, and H5P can be used in both regular face-to-face classes and in online classes. A careful analysis of some research findings proves that educators face a number of difficulties such as lack of training and insufficient time to prepare. However, the researchers in the field have also provided some possible solutions such as collaboration at different levels. The present scenario demands new approaches as online classes necessitate the implementation of modern techniques such as web-based gamification and interactive activities in order to actively engage students in ELT classes.
Keywords: gamification, interactive activities, pedagogical application, students' motivation, technology integration, web-based games

Introduction

Students' active engagement and participation in the learning process is essential. Many researchers have concluded that the desirable results in language learning can be achieved only when the learners are actively engaged (Mackenzie, 2014). As stated in Astin's Theory of Student Engagement, the best learning environment is the one in which it is possible to increase students' engagement (qt. in Akbari, Naderi, Simons, & Pilot, 2016). However, engaging students and making them participate in class activities has always been challenging. This challenge has increased with the current scenario of teaching online. Educators need more techniques to motivate their students to participate in online (synchronous/asynchronous) class activities. Some of the old techniques do not impress or sufficiently engage the present generation of students. Therefore, to achieve a better level of students' participation in ELT classes, educators deploy various techniques such as integration of technology and gamification, which is not an entirely new concept to language teaching (Flores, 2015). As this technique is significantly important in the current scenario, this research aims to find the appropriateness of exploiting gamification and interactive activities to achieve better students' engagement in ELT classes.

Researchers have identified reasons why there is a need to use technology and also the need to use technology in games and interactive activities. Implementing the extensive use of technology in all fields has, without question, brought new dimensions to gamification since there are numerous possibilities online to gamify ELT classes. Also, the majority of students who now study in higher educational institutions belong to Gen Z. In other words, they are 'digital natives'; the internet and social media have been a constant part their upbringing. Therefore, gamification has gained immense popularity as teachers have also realized the potential that games offer to their students. This present generation of students has different learning styles and new attitudes to the learning process and higher requirements for teaching and learning (Altuntaş, 2020). However, factors such as selection, creation, and implementation of web-based games and interactive activities need to be scrutinized in order to get successful results. There have been studies in the recent past about gamification and interactive tasks. This paper is an attempt at analyzing key research to cover key areas such as: technology integration, the importance of interaction, differences between games and gamification, benefits of using web-based gamification and interactive tasks, the effectiveness of using technology-oriented pedagogical applications with some examples, challenges, possible solutions, and recommendations.

Literature Review

Technology Integration

The impact (both direct and indirect) of technology has impacted on all areas in life, and ELT is no exception. In connection with technology, Chapelle (2020a) covers three broader societal trends: the connection between technology and language, the connection between technology and learning, and the connection between technology and the English language. Though these trends are, to the greater extent, happening outside the classroom, these trends do provide various opportunities for educators to use technology for English language teaching and learning. According to Altuntas (2020), the trends in education, reinforced by technology, require the implementation of new approaches and techniques such as gamification to implement active learning. Fortunately, most ELT professionals realize that incorporating technology in teaching and learning is inevitable need as it improves student engagement in the learning process. Although

technology provides many new ideas and possibilities for teaching/learning English, educators need to be able to efficiently integrate them into the curriculum and materials that they use (Chapelle, 2020b). Technology undoubtedly is an advantage to educators. Warlow (2016) agrees with this notion and points out that technology can be used as a tool to create and present engaging and relevant content. Consequently, students become engaged and active in the learning process. Therefore, educators can use technology-oriented pedagogical applications for this purpose.

Importance of Interaction for Language Acquisition

Interaction is necessary for language acquisition. Rivers (2000) premises her argument on the need for interaction when she asserts that communication derives essentially from the interaction. In a similar vein, Ellis (2004) argues that there is a natural development route to language learning only through an integrated and interactive framework. Thakur (2014) agrees when he says that if language teachers consider communication as their primary objective, interaction should always occur in ELT classes. Interactive tasks and activities help to facilitate meaningful communication. As per the language-focused strand described by Nation and Macalister (2010), interaction probably leads to improved accuracy and explicit attention to language learning. According to Courtney (2020), "Interactive activities require students to use their L2 to complete a shared task." Therefore, educators must choose and design learner-friendly communicative tasks and activities to ensure improved learner motivation and participation. They also need to think about innovative ways of using interactive tasks in language teaching classrooms.

Games and Gamification

Games, or game-based lessons, means using games for the purpose of teaching and learning process (in ELT). This technique has been in practice for a long time. However, gamification is a comparatively recent development. The term 'gamification' was first used by Nick Pelling (a British computer programmer) in 2003. It is the concept of adding game elements to a non-game situation (Isaacs, 2015). In other words, in a gamified lesson, some, many, or all of the elements of curriculum and instruction correspond to the aspects of game mechanics (Cassie, 2016). Gamification is widely used by corporate sectors for: gaining the involvement of their employees, identifying hidden talents, assessing skills, and getting consensus on disputed issues. Thus, there is vast scope for gamification. With technological advancements, gamification has become more challenging for educators, but at the same time, there are increased opportunities to be creative. According to Coponetto et al., gamification in education refers to the introduction of game design elements and gameful experiences in the design of learning processes (As cited in Dichev & Dicheva, 2017). This adoption supports learning in various contexts to address related attitudes, activities, and behaviors. The method of gamification in education can easily be comprehended by looking at the 'Educational Gamification Five-Step Model' of Huang and Soman (2013).

Figure 1. Educational Gamification Five-Step Model (Huang & Soman, 2013)

Fundamentally, games are based on four essential elements: a set of rules, a clear objective or goal, an element of competition, and an element of chance. In addition to these, gamification includes elements that engage and motivate through the use of points, badges, levels, leaderboards, feedback, and challenges (Albrecht & Cherrington, 2019).

Gamification in Teaching/Learning English as a Second Language and as a Foreign Language
Veljković Michos (2017) urges educators to use gamification "to enhance motivation, concentration, effort, and other positive values common to all games." The benefits of gamification stated here make it easy for foreign language/second language educators to create a conducive environment in the language classroom. According to Flores (2015), when game elements are used in L2 classes, learners take charge of their learning. In other words, learner autonomy is achievable through gamification. Flores (2015) further argues that learners move out of a reserved, less engaged stage to a more motivated stage. After studying twenty-two publications dating from 2008 through 2019 for their research, Dehghanzadeh, Fardanesh, Hatami, Talaee, and Noroozi (2019) corroborate the positive effects of gamification on learners' learning experience and their learning outcomes. They list four targeted learning outcomes of gamified Learning English as a Second Language (LESL): content language learning, engagement, motivation, and satisfaction. Hence, implementation of gamification in foreign language learning as well as in LESL is applicable as educators need to motivate and engage the learners at the learning process.

Game-based Learning and Game-based Language Learning
There is also a concept called game-based learning. A simple definition to game-based learning is 'learning that is facilitated by the use of a game'. In other words, it is the adoption of games for educational purposes. Although a simple definition, game-based learning has various functions, types, and purposes. For instance, game-based learning can be used at a pre-school level (for children under 5) and at a university for advanced level students. It can be just a simple game played face-to-face or a complex one using modern devices. Moreover, game-based learning can be used for any learning. According to Plass, Homer, and Kinzer (2015), game-based learning "involves the use of game elements, such as incentive systems, to motivate players to engage in a task they otherwise would not find attractive." Clearly game-based language learning is an effective method because games create a positive learning atmosphere in language learning classes. It ensures the active role of learners, which determines the success of language learning. Dehghanzadeh et al. (2019) assert that gamified LESL environments have become a promising field.

Benefits of Using Gamification and Interactive Tasks
    Many researchers have found that there are benefits of using gamification and interactive tasks, particularly in foreign/second language learning. According to Yolageldili and Arikan (2011), there is a special role for games in any foreign language teaching programme as they facilitate learning. Flores (2015) lists many benefits: increasing students' participation, motivating learners by game elements and techniques, giving immediate feedback, and creating a sense of empowerment and engagement among students. He concludes his research 'Gamification to Enhance Second Language Learning' by saying that "the use of Gamification in L2 learning contributes positively to the learning experience". Motivating students is the most significant benefit from this list. Boyinbode (2018) argues that if learners are highly motivated, they will find

a way to solve a challenge they face. Some other benefits of gamification are making learning enjoyable and interactive, increasing learner engagement, and improving knowledge absorption and retention (Chinyelu & Esther, 2019). According to Bower (2017), students can get experiential learning when educators effectively incorporate gamification in language teaching. Another noticeable benefit of using gamification or interactive activities is that learners lose some inhibition. Students' sense of embarrassment is lessened, and the aspect of peer scrutiny is reduced (Yunus & Azman, 2019). Studies prove that gamification also reduces the stress level of students. Gamified activities promote participatory approaches, collaboration, self-guided course, more manageable and more effective assessments, and student creativity and retention (As cited in Dichev & Dicheva, 2017). Moreover, gamification offers features such as badges and leaderboards that motivate students. According to Natalie (2015), leading institutions find that awarding Open Badges is an effective way to increase motivation. Schindler, Burkholder, Morad, and Marsh (2017) found that digital games provide the most far-reaching influence across different types of student engagement.

Interactive activities/tasks also return positive results in language learning as the fundamental purpose of using any language is communication. According to Wilkie, Zakaria, McDonald, and Borland (2018), interaction has an indispensable role in developing the language ability of learners as Online Interactive Activities cause benefits in Blended learning. They also provide opportunity for educators to use active learning methods for delivery of teaching. With these methods, instructors can use activities that students do both in-class, and pre-/post-class. Teachers need to promote learner interaction in their classes so that the learners learn the target language effectively. There are also possibilities to encourage teamwork, cooperation, and collaboration among learners if educators design and incorporate the appropriate gamification and interactive tasks in teaching. Interestingly, when gamification and interactive activities are enhanced with technology using the right platforms, students are highly motivated. They willingly take part in the learning process. These web-based gamification and interactive activities are adaptable for regular face-to-face classes and online synchronous and asynchronous classes.

Selection Criteria for Gamification and Interactive Tasks

As covered previously, there are many benefits of using gamification and interactive tasks in ELT if educators carefully and effectively integrate them with technology. The onus is on educators to select appropriate lessons/activities for gamification and interactive activities. There is no need to gamify each activity. According to Biech (2015), the learners' success lies in teachers' selection of the right mode to the right objective. It is applicable for selecting and designing tasks for gamification and interaction.

Effectiveness of Using Technology-oriented Pedagogical Applications

Although there are many technology-oriented pedagogical applications or websites for gamification and interactive activities, four such applications are used as examples for a brief analysis here: Forum (Moodle), Nearpod, Kahoot!, and H5P.

Forum (Moodle)

Researchers recommend that educators need to explore the possibilities of creating more and more opportunities for students' interaction. There are various types of interaction occurring

in regular face-to-face classes. However, it is essential to integrate technology, that will enhance/substitute classroom interactions. For instance, 'Forum', available with Moodle, or a similar type of discussion board offered by various websites such as kialo-edu.com can be used as a good platform for interaction. These media/websites provide multiple options: posting questions for discussion, broadcasting video, uploading word or pdf files for relevant information, posting individual comments, using comment threads, etc. Forum discussions can be incorporated efficiently in teaching/learning to attain better results. Ginosyan and Tuzlukova (2015) concluded their research on using Moodle forum for teaching English by demonstrating that Moodle forum supports writing fluency. They also found that forum contributes to the development of language learners' communication skills' through an online language learning environment by responding to online assignments and commenting on others' work or comments.   Moreover, forums can create the opportunity to engage in online discussions (an important 21st century skill), create better in-class discussions as follow-up, give fair and ample opportunities for all students, especially for introverted students (who otherwise do not normally participate in regular classroom discussions), give plenty of time to think at one's own pace, provide chances to share one's ideas and comment on others' points of view, bring a sense of responsibility (as all comments are recorded), and use it as a part of assessment when required. Gurung and Kadel (2018) list more benefits such as possibilities for creating dynamic webpages, linking to a particular posting – technically known as permalink, viewing the discussion by all users, and setting deadlines for discussion. Also, an online forum/discussion board is suitable for any type of class. For example, it is an excellent tool for flipped classroom use. It can save a lot of time in a synchronous class as students have prepared themselves for the lesson prior to the synchronous class. Although there is a long list of benefits, no complicated technology is required at the implementation stage. The users only need to open an account and create a discussion on their favourite platform by following simple, self-explanatory guidelines or tutorials. Although there are many websites to offer forum, Moodle, according to GOUNANE (2020), provides a safe environment as in most cases it is set up as an official educational platform.

Nearpod

Nearpod is a multifaceted student engagement platform. Nearpod Silver edition is free; however, more features are available with Gold and School versions, which are not free. Sanmugam, Selvarajoo, Ramayah, and Lee (2019) find Nearpod user friendly and highly interactive. They also recommend the use of Nearpod, as educators can improve student engagement and monitor students' progress in real time. There are many advantages of using Nearpod. First, it can be plugged into existing learning management systems (LMS) like Moodle. So, it is easily accessible. Next, there are many collaborative and engaging activities available with Nearpod, which can be exploited to ensure interaction in ELT classes. Virtual reality, simulations, and gamified quizzes are some other options that can be incorporated with Nearpod lessons. In addition, interactive activities can be designed by having students draw on a map/diagram, respond to open-ended questions, take a multiple-choice quiz, and post a note or an image to a collaboration board. It is a good platform for formative assessments, too, as records can also be maintained. Nearpod also has a library of pre-made Nearpod presentations (shared by a network of teachers), which can be either as is if appropriate or customized to suit teachers'/students' needs. Furthermore, the lessons created in Nearpod can be presented in three teaching modes: live participation (suitable for synchronous classes), student-paced (useful for

assigning as homework tasks for any type of classes), and front of class (for regular face-to-face classes). Another feature is that students can design their slideshows and use them to teach others. Therefore, the wide range of interactive activities provided by Nearpod make this tool very useful for ELT classes. Burton (2019) recommends the use of Nearpod in classrooms to increase student engagement. He observes that even more reticent students willingly participate and ask questions.

Kahoot!

         Kahoot! is a game-based learning platform. According to Sartor (2020), Kahoot! gamifies learning by creating engaging quizzes. It is available in free and paid versions. Veljković Michos (2017) describes Kahoot! as 'a student response system' as there are options such as quizzes, discussions, and surveys. These options challenge students to learn and make them participate. In Kahoot!, there are two modes of play: the first one is 'live game' as items are shown on teachers'/presenters' screen, and students/participants answer using their devices. Alternatively, games can be sent as homework tasks, and students can answer them in their own time. In both cases, immediate feedback is given and a leaderboard is shown to encourage competitiveness. Yunus and Azman (2019) call the 'leaderboard' a core game element in Kahoot!. Another clear advantage with Kahoot! is it can be used at any time during a lesson to engage students in the learning process or to assess them (formative assessment). Furthermore, with few simple instructions for students and teachers, Kahoot! is user-friendly (Wichadee & Pattanapichet, 2018). Similarly, it is accessible on smartphones, tabs, and computers. Interestingly, 'BYOD' (Bring Your Own Device) is the new approach followed at many institutions so that the availability of devices is less of an issue.

         There are many benefits when we use Kahoot! in ELT classes. Veljković Michos (2017) lists some of the benefits: promoting active learning of students, students' engagement, participation in the class, collaboration with other students, and sharing knowledge. The first step to use Kahoot! is to create an account and prepare materials on kahoot.com. Teachers can alternatively choose suitable gamified activities or quizzes from over 40 million freely accessible Kahoot! games. Teachers then share a system-generated code with their students which they then use at kahoot.it to play these games using their name and the provided code. Currently, there are four different types of Kahoot!: quiz, jumble, survey, and discussion. Kahoot! quizzes are popular among users as marks are given based on accuracy and speed. There are two options available for players (students): classic mode – Player vs. Player and team mode – Team vs. Team. In short, Kahoot! has adopted prime gamification elements such as feedback, points, leaderboard, teamwork, and performance graphs. Veljković Michos (2017) concludes the research recommending Kahoot! as a gaming tool for educational institutions.

H5P

         H5P, a free and open technology designed to create and share interactive (HTML5) content of thirty types, is available on smartphones, tabs, and computers. It is highly compatible as it can be plugged into most existing LMSs and course management systems (CMSs). The users are required to create an account, and start exploring/exploiting all the options available. There are many tutorials available online to learn about H5P. According to Sartor (2018), "The H5P format is also useful for English language students. Students are engaged with relevant technology while learning English". As per the research by Wilkie et al. (2018), H5P has a variety of interactive

activities. Educators can use H5P to make rich interactive web experiences by creating and editing interactive videos, presentations, games, etc. For instance, while creating an interactive video task on H5P, users can make it more interactive as H5P provides various unique options such as automatically pausing the video for getting a response, setting actions for right or wrong answers, giving different types of feedback, providing extra information (in the form of pictures, links, and labels), assigning a summary task, etc. The option of setting automatic replay of a particular part of the video (when a wrong answer is given) is useful for self-correction. Thus, a simple video can be adapted to be a rich (technology-enhanced) task. It can either be directly shared with students (just by sending the link) or linked with the existing LMS, as mentioned earlier. These types of interactive videos are motivating for learners, especially for language learners. Sartor (2020) agrees by saying that the students of the present generation learn more via video than text. She asserts that the importance of using tools like H5P cannot be underemphasized as it is suitable for different levels and students are able to learn in different ways and at different speeds.

Challenges

Although there are some challenges encountered by teachers and students while using technology for education, researchers have identified the most important ones related to gamification and interactive tasks (using technology). Johnson, Jacovina, Russell, and Soto (2016) have classified challenges into two types: external and internal. The external challenges include access constraint, the challenge of inadequate training, and the support constraint. For example, some students and teachers have a poor internet connection. In addition, some teachers need proper training on how to integrate technology with their teaching. On the other hand, most students (certainly those considered digital natives) also face problems with technology while using some LMSs or e-platforms such as G-Suite or Moodle if they have not received proper training. Some of the websites with advanced options for gamification and interactive activities provide paid services for partial or full options. The internal challenges, such as teachers' attitudes and beliefs, have also been listed in their research. For instance, since most educators are digital immigrants, they are likely to encounter more challenges using such technology. The next serious issue is when teachers want to create gamified as well as interactive tasks/activities using platforms such as Nearpod, Kahoot!, or H5P, they need more time, which will, in turn, affect the timely completion of their other academic duties. In his research article, Atabek (2019) lists many challenges which include inadequacy of physical and technological infrastructure, insufficiency of in-service and preservice training and content support.

Discussion

More than ever, gamification and interactive activities are now popular in the field of ELT thanks to the research done in those fields. Research findings prove the positive effects of using web-based gamification and interactive activities. For instance, Altuntaş (2020) has found that gamification enhances motivation and learning. The use of technology in language teaching is now common. Yet, there is not enough empirical evidence to show the direct effects of using a particular application in language teaching/learning. Flores (2015) agrees with this point and calls for more research in order to increase empirical evidence. In addition, more research is needed in finding the specific gamification elements which are related to the learning outcomes. In support of this argument, Dehghanzadeh et al. (2019) conclude that none of the twenty-two publications, that they studied for their research, reported specific gamification elements associated to the

learning experiences and outcomes. Moreover, the research done in this specific area focuses mainly on regular face-to-face classes. However, since the global scenario has changed due to the current pandemic situation, online learning has become a necessity. In both asynchronous and synchronous classes, the students' learning environment is different. Most students may not be able to set up a conducive classroom atmosphere at home. Moreover, the motivation level of learners is not at the same level when they attend online classes. Some of the effective techniques such as pair-work or group-work cannot be effectively conducted by educators in online classes. Educators need to give special attention to asynchronous classes as learners need to be motivated and involved in the learning process. To highlight the significance of motivation in virtual classes, Selvi (2010) states that motivation is the key variable that affects students' learning. She also insists on the necessity of external motivation for students to stimulate their learning and to support their participation in a virtual learning environment. Therefore, the need for using gamification and interactive activities is essential to motivate students. Subsequently, web-based games and interactive activities will be the natural choice as the classes are online.

Findings of some research prove that students find web-based gamification tools and interactive activities more interesting. Wichadee and Pattanapichet (2018), for instance, consider Kahoot! a good digital game option because it increases students' interest in language learning. It also makes learning more fun. Sartor (2018) finds H5P a useful application to create interactive videos. She also predicts more interactive videos will be created in the future to teach language. There is clearly still scope for further research on the actual effects the tools and principles mentioned above have on students and their learning in online classes using gamification. For instance, there is a need for research on the effectiveness of using H5P interactive tasks for listening and speaking skills.

Possible Solutions and Recommendations

This research identifies the following possible solutions and recommendations for better use of gamification and interactive tasks:

- ✓ Teachers who face problems with advanced technologies can first try using the simpler ones (Kessler, 2020).
- ✓ Educators should choose a technology that is comfortable for them (Johnson et al., 2016).
- ✓ Proper training should be given to both teachers and students whenever needed. (GHOUNANE, 2020)
- ✓ Activities or materials that are created by a teacher can first be tried with fellow teachers (as students) to get suitable feedback or to identify any shortcomings. (Kessler, 2020)
- ✓ Teachers can share materials (such as gamified/interactive activities) among themselves in order to be more efficient.
- ✓ Teachers should consider collaborating closely with their peers (Butler, Heslup, & Kurth, 2015). Collaboration at all levels (institutional, local, regional, national, and international) is essential to provide technology integrated education.
- ✓ According to Al-Issa (2009), games can be used to motivate even student teachers (pre-service teachers) whose motivation level is generally low in Oman.
- ✓ Students should find the integration of technology meaningful and related to real life. Only then, will they be interested in it (Bond & Bedenlier, 2019).

✓ Institutions or competent authorities may consider buying paid versions of useful applications so that advanced options are available for use.

✓ Educators need to be astute in the technologically advanced world, especially at more challenging times caused by various factors, such as a pandemic. Language teachers must keep themselves up to date with new tech tools and trends and continue to identify useful software and smartphone apps, which will help them align with their required pedagogical outcomes. (Sartor, 2020)

Conclusion

When learners are actively engaged in ELT classes, they learn better. By keeping up to date on outside classroom trends and changes, most educators choose technology as a useful tool to improve student engagement. Students, generally being digital natives, respond positively to this. According to Sartor (2020), 'Gen Z' students constantly use technology and expect their educators teach them using technology. Gamification and interactive activities help teachers fulfil their students' expectations and achieve the outcomes in a desirable manner. Games are different from gamification as the latter is the concept of adding game elements to real-world or productive activities. There are many benefits of using gamification and interactive activities if the activities are carefully selected, designed, and used in teaching/learning. For instance, Nearpod and Kahoot! are considered good choices for gamification. Similarly, Forum (Moodle), Nearpod and H5P are useful for creating interactive activities. The effectiveness of games and interactive activities has been established by research. For instance, as a concluding remark to their research on effectiveness of teaching grammar using gamification, Yolageldili and Arikan (2011) recommend that games can be used in materials, and by presenting alternative games, foreign language teaching can be enriched. Shamsutdinova, Khakimzyanova, and Melnikova (2017) argue that interactive activities motivate students to be attentive and participatory, and they also help educators create interesting lessons. However, there is not currently enough research to establish the effectiveness of using specific web-based games and interactive activities in ELT online classes.

Although techniques such as web-based games and interactive activities are used by some educators, there is an urgent need to use them in online classes to gain learner motivation. The success of asynchronous classes depends on learners' interest, motivation, and involvement. Research conducted by Selvi (2010) concludes that students' involvement in online classroom learning determines the success of the learning process. Hence, it is highly recommended that educators use web-based games and interactive activities to achieve the desired results through increased student engagement. Whilst there is general concern about the difficulties faced in real time use of games and interactive activities and there are challenges in using gamification and interactive activities in ELT classes, careful consideration and execution of the solutions and recommendations mentioned above will solve them.

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