Gamification In English Language Teaching: A Pathway to Fostering Teacher-Student Rapport, Teacher Immediacy and Students' Willingness to Communicate

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Abstract
This research examines the role of gamification in enhancing English language teaching and investigates how it helps in improving teacher-student rapport (TSR), teacher immediacy (TI), and students' willingness to communicate (WTC). Research focusing on the impact of gamification on these variables is limited. This study bridges the existing gap and sheds light on the necessity of incorporating gamification in foreign language teaching. Data for the study were collected from 50 EFL teachers and 165 EFL students in prominent higher education institutions in two south Indian states, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Purposive sampling was used to collect the data, and two structured questionnaires were distributed. The reliability of the questionnaire was checked using Cronbach's Alpha. Different statistical methods and descriptive analysis were used to interpret, represent, and analyze the results of the study. It is observed that gamified modules significantly improve the students' vocabulary acquisition and motivate them to improve their language skills. They also help to enhance TSR and TI, paving the way to improved WTC. Although gamified simulations prepare students for real-world technical communication scenarios in English, it is observed that EFL teachers face several implementation challenges in the classroom.
Key words: English Language Teaching, Foreign Language Teaching, Gamification, Education, Technology

Introduction

The rise of language learning apps has been driven by technological advancements, gaining widespread popularity among global language learners (Boudadi & Gutiérrez-Colon, 2020; Jeon, 2022; Kuo et al., 2014; Loewen et al., 2019). Since its introduction in 2002, gamification has been increasingly applied across various fields, including education (Bai, Hew & Huang, 2020). Gamified activities provide a motivating environment that can improve learners' language skills and confidence (Castañeda & Cho, 2016; Hanus & Fox, 2015; Korosidou & Bratitsis, 2021; Qiao et al., 2022; Tomé Klock et al., 2015; Zhang & Zou, 2022). Research has shown that gamification can substantially improve English language learning outcomes (Lee & Baek, 2023). Students receiving instruction in English commonly encounter obstacles due to deficiencies in their academic English proficiency. Specifically, this deficiency is evident in writing, where they struggle to articulate their ideas in well-structured essays that adhere to established scholarly conventions (Evans & Morrison, 2011). Additionally, they face difficulties comprehending lectures and instructors' accents, hindering effective listening (Hellekjær, 2010). Oral communication also poses challenges, as students struggle to deliver confident presentations and engage meaningfully in seminar discussions (Kırkgöz, 2005). Furthermore, the abundance of unfamiliar vocabulary in textbooks creates significant barriers to reading comprehension (Andrade, 2006). These language-related hurdles underscore the need for targeted support to enhance academic English skills, particularly in areas such as asking questions, engaging in conversation, and expressing opinions confidently in English. By focusing on these critical skills, educators can help students overcome the challenges associated with English-language instruction (Aizawa et al., 2020). Integrating game design elements into English language instruction greatly enhances EFL/ESL students' linguistic abilities, spanning receptive (listening and reading) and productive (speaking and writing) skills (Chan & Lo, 2024). According to Kaban and Karadeniz (2021), gamification's impact on education exceeds its utility as a teaching aid, as it also facilitates comprehensive content review and learner evaluation. The multifunctional nature of gamification is corroborated by Almusharraf (2023) and Chen (2022), underscoring its transformative power to reshape pedagogical approaches and enrich educational outcomes, particularly in English language instruction. This study focuses on the role of gamification in English language teaching and how it contributes to fostering teacher-student rapport, teacher immediacy, and students' willingness to communicate.

Literature review

In game-based learning, educational games are intentionally designed to teach language skills, serving as the main platform for content delivery and language development (Hung et al., 2018). The current era demands a shift toward making learning not only technologically enhanced but also more engaging and effective (Lee & Baek, 2023). Studies show that genuinely interested learners who engage in language learning achieve better results and retain language skills longer (Le-Thi et al., 2020; Philp & Duchesne, 2016). In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), gamification involves applying game design principles and features like rewards, badges, leaderboards, and challenges to motivate learners, increase engagement, and make the learning process more enjoyable (Burke, 2016). Research by Stoyanova et al. (2018) demonstrates that integrating gamification in educational settings has a profoundly positive impact on learners' emotional and attitudinal responses, characterized by increased enthusiasm, motivation, diminished anxiety, and a strengthened sense of achievement. According to Chan and Lo (2024), gamification improves students' English language skills and encourages autonomous learning. Chen's (2022) study, which investigates EFL learners' perspectives on lessons combining Kahoot's evaluative tools and Padlet's collaborative features, provides a noticeable observation. The findings demonstrate that gamification significantly enhances student motivation, which is a pivotal aspect of effective education. Aziz (2022) similarly observed that integrating Kahoot and Padlet in international student classrooms yielded numerous benefits, including enhanced learning outcomes, stimulated critical thinking, and cultivated an inclusive educational environment. The students acknowledged the merits of the gamified learning process, deeming it a novel, engaging, and game-like approach that contributed to their English language studies (Chan & Lo, 2024). This highlights gamification's significant impact on improving English language skills, cultivating positive learner attitudes, and creating an engaging and immersive environment conducive to language acquisition.

Research by Su and Zou (2022) and Loewen et al. (2019) highlight the beneficial impact of gamified mobile apps on EFL learners' language achievement. The gamified features of mobile apps are thought to enhance the language proficiency of EFL learners (Lee & Baek, 2023). Furthermore, studies suggest that enjoying a foreign language can boost learners' engagement and participation in group language learning activities (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014, 2016; Fredrickson, 2001). Similarly, Su and Zou (2022) investigated the impact of digital gamified language learning activities on language achievement among beginner, intermediate, and advanced learners. Their study found that gamified features enhanced language proficiency, and learners' perceptions of the learning experience were positive. Pham and Pham (2022) also explored the benefits of digital gamified language learning activities in improving English language learning. Thus, gamification has emerged as a promising approach for foreign language learning (FLL), which involves using game design elements to boost learner engagement and academic performance (Luo, 2023).

Meanwhile, numerous studies underscore the importance of teachers' immediacy behaviors in fostering student engagement and willingness to communicate in the classroom, highlighting its vital role in academic settings (Al-Murtadha, 2019; Dakakni & Safa, 2023; Guo et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2023; Li & Chen, 2023; Marzuki et al., 2023; Pan et al., 2023; Shahzad et al., 2023; Song et al., 2016; Zhi & Wang, 2024). It's crucial for language learners to be willing to communicate as it offers authentic chances to practice the target language in real-life situations, enhancing language acquisition (Wang et al., 2022; Wang & Kruk, 2024; Wang, Derakhshan & Zhang, 2021). WTC enables learners to interact with speakers from diverse cultural backgrounds, promoting cross-cultural understanding and intercultural competence (Zhi & Wang, 2024). By investigating the impact of gamification on variables like TSR, TI, and WTC in English language teaching, researchers can gain valuable insights into the key factors influencing effective language acquisition and communication, ultimately improving teaching practices (Bergil, 2016; Dewaele & Paxelescu, 2021; Fallah, 2014; Li, Wu & Wang, 2024; Wang & Wang, 2024; Wang, Derakhshan, Pawlak & Mehdizadeh, 2024). As English is a highly valued language taught globally, its acquisition is essential (John, 2021). Gamification can act as a valuable tool for teachers to make language learning engaging and effective. Research has shown that an individual’s attitude plays a crucial role in acquiring a new language (John, 2020). By incorporating gamification into language classes, teachers can boost students' motivation and improve their attitude toward language learning.

Gamification in language classrooms offers numerous benefits, including personalized learning experiences, adaptive feedback, and authentic language practice, ultimately transforming the learning process (Zhi & Wang, 2024). As John and George (2024) suggest, teachers can use

digital media, electronic literature, and technological tools like gamified apps to teach English and other foreign languages. Examining WTC in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning is vital due to its substantial influence on language acquisition and communication strategies (Zhi & Wang, 2024). Although previous research has explored individual variables, a comprehensive study investigating the combined effects of gamified classes on WTC, TSR, and TI in EFL education is lacking. This knowledge gap underscores the need for a holistic study using both quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore the complex relationships between EFL students' attitudes towards gamified classes, TSR, TI, and WTC. While several studies have shown that digital gamified language learning can improve language skills, few studies have investigated its effectiveness specifically in the context of foreign language acquisition (Luo, 2023). Further research is needed to investigate the impact of digital gamified language learning on language achievement, particularly in the EFL context (Liu, Fathi & Rahimi, 2024). To date, there has been a lack of systematic research examining the impact of digital gamified language learning on EFL students' language achievement, TSR, TI, and WTC. The characteristics and effectiveness of gamification in FLL remain unclear (Luo, 2023). This study seeks to address this knowledge gap by investigating the interplay between these factors and their influence on EFL students' WTC, TI, and TSR. By gaining a deeper understanding of these dynamics, researchers and educators can better comprehend the limitations and benefits of gamification in foreign language education, ultimately advancing the development of innovative teaching strategies.

Research questions

This research tries to answer the following questions: **(RQ1)** Does gamified English language teaching help enhance EFL students' English language proficiency? **(RQ2)** Does gamified English language teaching foster TSR, TI, and students' WTC? **(RQ3)** Do EFL teachers face implementation challenges while practicing gamification techniques in real-classroom scenarios?

Methodology

Ethics and consent

The study participants completed the questionnaire voluntarily and gave their consent to publish the results. The survey was carefully crafted and tested to ensure its accuracy and reliability, following strict research guidelines.

Participants and research context

This study was carried out among EFL teachers and students in higher education institutions. A pilot study with 8 faculty members and 10 students was conducted to refine the questionnaire, clarifying technical terms that were previously unclear to some students. To ensure students' understanding, the survey was then administered to a larger sample of 215 participants (50 EFL teachers and 165 EFL students) across two major Indian states, Tamil Nadu (57%) and Kerala (43%).

Research instrument

The study utilizes a structured questionnaire to enable longitudinal research, tracking changes in behaviors, attitudes, and opinions over time. This approach ensures precise and accurate data collection suitable for statistical analysis. The questionnaire maintains respondents' anonymity to encourage honest responses. The study employed a purposive sampling technique, which ensured that the sample was relevant and informative.

Two survey questionnaires, utilizing a five-point Likert scale, were administered to 165 EFL students and 50 EFL faculty members. Given their daily experience with gamified language teaching and learning methods, they were ideal respondents for assessing the approach's advantages and limitations. In order to ensure the questionnaire's consistency and reliability, Cronbach's Alpha was applied, validating its ability to yield trustworthy results. The questionnaire for students collected demographic information, including gender, age, education level, and institution location, whereas the questionnaire for educators verified their professional status.

The questionnaires assessed the capability of gamified English language teaching to develop the English proficiency of EFL students and its capacity to foster TI, TSR, and students' WTC. They also collected data regarding the obstacles faced by both EFL teachers and students in conducting effective gamified EFL classes.

Data analysis

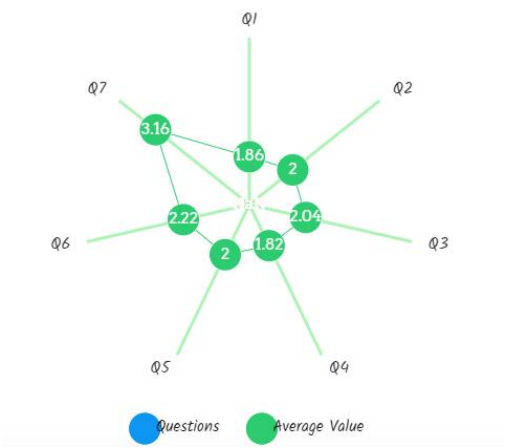
The responses were analyzed using a five-point Likert scale, with a range of 4 and an interval of 0.80. The mean interval scale was categorized into five levels, ranging from highly positive (1.00-1.80) to highly negative (4.21-5.00). The data were further examined using graphical analysis and descriptive statistics to draw meaningful conclusions. Windows-based applications facilitated all these analyses, enabling a thorough and visual representation of the results.

Results of the study

This study is divided into two parts: the first part deals with the point of views and opinions of EFL teachers while the second section focuses on the perspectives and opinions of EFL students. Several questions were asked to the teachers and students to examine the multifaceted sides of gamified language teaching. The average values obtained for the questions are 1.86, 2.00, 2.04, 1.82, 2.00, 2.22 and 3.16 for Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4, Q5, Q6 and Q7 respectively.

Table 1. Results obtained after distributing the questionnaire among EFL teachers in higher education institutions

Questions	Average value	Explanation of the results in a nutshell
Q1	1.86	Gamified ELT substantially enhance students' language proficiency, particularly in general communication, and notably improve their WTC.
Q2	2.00	Designing gamified modules aligning with ELT objectives promote TSR and authentic language use significantly.
Q3	2.04	EFL teachers encounter substantial obstacles, including time constraints and technological issues, while integrating gamification in classroom sessions.
Q4	1.82	Gamification significantly influences the students and considerably increases teacher-student rapport.
Q5	2.00	Gamification facilitates TI and it substantially promotes students' WTC.
Q6	2.22	Gamified lessons enable moderately effective personalized learning experiences in foreign language learning.
Q7	3.16	The likelihood of AI and gamified modules replacing human teachers in future is relatively low, and the value of teacher intervention remains high.



Source: Graph created for this study

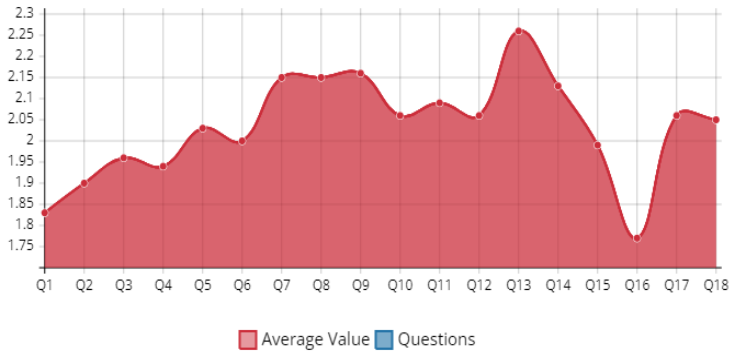
Figure 1: Graphical representation of responses received from EFL teachers

On the other hand, 18 questions were asked to EFL students to understand the significance of gamified language teaching modules. The average values obtained and the explanation of the result in brief are given in table 2.

Table 2. Results obtained after distributing the questionnaire among EFL students in higher education institutions

Questions	Average value	Explanation of the result in a nutshell
Q1	1.83	English language teaching modules that incorporate AI-supported gamification show significant effectiveness in enhancing students' language proficiency, leading to improved WTC.
Q2	1.90	Gamified modules in English language teaching improve students' vocabulary acquisition in a highly effective manner contributing to high level of WTC.
Q3	1.96	Gamified language learning activities are highly engaging, promoting active participation among EFL students and subsequently boosting their WTC.
Q4	1.94	EFL students are highly interested and motivated in improving their language skills through gamified modules and employing it in EFL classes increase TSR.
Q5	2.03	Gamified modules reduce the emotional distance between EFL teachers and students effectively and thus it contributes to increased TSR and TI.
Q6	2.00	Gamified modules increase student engagement and it deepens TI substantially.
Q7	2.15	Interactive AI-based gamified learning activities foster student-student and student-teacher interaction and boost the proximity positively which help in better TI.
Q8	2.15	Gamified simulations prepare students for real-world technical communication scenarios in English effectively.
Q9	2.16	The negative competitive environment hinders the effectiveness of gamified English language teaching in EFL education to a great extent.
Q10	2.06	One of the crucial factors that hinder successful integration of gamified modules into EFL teaching is time constraint.
Q11	2.09	Technical difficulties significantly impede students' engagement with gamified language learning activities in EFL education
Q12	2.06	Lack of internet access and technology limit the effectiveness of gamified English language teaching in EFL education
Q13	2.26	Gamification makes the process of learning enjoyable and promotes TSR.
Q14	2.13	When health and psychological issues among students pose a challenge to the effective implementation of gamified language teaching in EFL education, TI and TSR promote student motivation significantly and resolve these challenges to a great extent.
Q15	1.99	Gamified language learning materials provide a reasonably wide range of coverage, accommodating various proficiency levels and learning styles to a moderate degree.

Q16	1.77	The interactive contents offered by gamified language learning materials promote EFL learning and increase TSR and WTC.
Q17	2.06	Gamified learning shows some flexibility in adapting to learners' individual strengths and weaknesses.
Q18	2.05	Gamified learning tools effectively cater to individual learners' unique language learning pace and style, which in turn promote their willingness to communicate (WTC).



Source: Graph created for this study

Figure 2: Graphical representation of responses received from EFL students

Discussion

Study conducted among EFL educators

This study paved the way for several findings related to the role of gamification in enhancing TSR, TI, and students' WTC. 82.5% of the respondents stated that gamified ELT substantially enhances EFL students' language proficiency and, thus, WTC. Gamified modules help enhance students' English language proficiency for general communication to a significant level. This aligns with the study of Aldalur and Perez (2023), who reported that gamification helps students better acquire the knowledge taught in class. Designing gamified modules aligning with English language teaching objectives promotes teacher-student rapport, and several EFL teachers seconded this opinion. It is observed that gamification helps students improve their subject-related technical communication skills and keeps them motivated. Since traditional lecturing practices are demotivating for the students (Aldalur & Perez, 2023), lecturers incorporate and use new technological methods to hold the students' attention. This helps to increase TI and TSR levels. The findings of the current research and the remarks of Purgina et al. (2019) underscore the same idea. For engagement enhancement or achievement improvement, gamification for foreign language learning has become a clear trend in recent years (Purgina et al., 2019). 77.8% of teachers supported this point of view and mentioned that gamified language learning modules help the students enhance their subject-related technical communication skills.

Meanwhile, it is also observed that 81% of EFL teachers face severe implementation challenges while practicing gamification in real classroom scenarios. Certain challenges, like technological issues, lack of sufficient time, etc., are major hindrances. It is also observed that gamified English classes motivate the students and improve their vocabulary and other related language skills. It ultimately increases the TSR level. 85.7% of teachers supported this perspective. This finding goes hand in hand with the observation of Lee and Baek (2023). Their study reveals that gamification affects different aspects of English proficiency, notably vocabulary, listening, and writing skills. By promoting TI and TSR levels, gamified classes increase WTC. Gamification helps to create an overall teacher-student and student-student connection and sheds anxiety and fear. Along with these aspects, gamified lessons also provide personalized learning experiences to EFL students, as per the opinion of 73% of EFL teachers. 65% of teachers stressed the unlikeliness of human teachers being replaced with artificial intelligence and gamified language teaching facilities in the future as the cultural nuances and subtleties of language are still beyond the control of AI.

In order to make the gamified classes more effective, educators must design clear learning objectives aligned with language learning goals. It includes activities related to building vocabulary, grammar practice, reading, listening, writing, and speaking. The teachers must also understand their students' interests, ages, and language levels and choose suitable game types. It would be better to design custom games using tools like Google Forms and Kahoot, integrate game-based learning software like Duolingo, incorporate game elements into existing lessons, and monitor progress to adjust the game design. They can also leverage platforms like Babbel, Quizlet, ClassDojo, and Classcraft, as well as game development software like Construct 3 and Unity. Moreover, to stay updated, educators should attend conferences and workshops related to gamification joi and online communities and collaborate with fellow educators to share resources and best practices.

A study conducted among EFL students

The study among EFL students revealed the significance of gamification in foreign language teaching classes. It also unveiled the interconnectedness between gamified ELT classes, TSR, TI, and WTC. Major challenges faced by EFL teachers and students while practicing gamification in real-time situations are also explored in this study. It has been found that gamified English language learning modules effectively enhance students' language proficiency in foreign language learning. 77.7% of the respondents stated that gamified English language teaching is highly helpful in enhancing language proficiency, which leads to a high level of willingness to communicate. Only a minor percentage of EFL students discarded this view. It is also observed that gamified modules can improve the vocabulary acquisition of EFL students. 73.7% seconded this opinion. It also improves the students' technical communication skills, leading to increased WTC and TSR. It helps the students articulate complex technical concepts in English and comprehend the language better. 72% of the respondents had this observation.

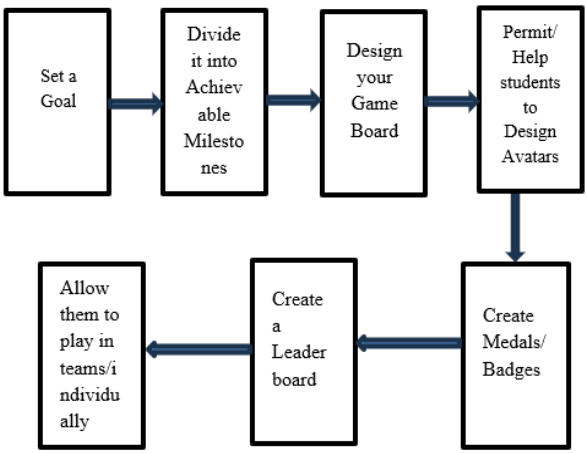
The study finds that gamified language learning activities foster active participation and language practice among EFL students. 72% of the students supported this point of view. These observations align with Jones (2009) and prove that gamification has emerged as a promising approach to foreign language learning. It has also been identified that EFL students are highly motivated to improve their language skills through gamified ELT modules, which increases TSR. It was found that the students are very much interested in gamified learning activities as they facilitate peer-to-peer technical communication practices. It reduces the emotional distance between the teacher and students, resulting in a healthy teacher-student rapport and better teacher immediacy. It also increases student engagement and deepens the bond between EFL teachers and students. The gamified simulations prepare the students for real-world technical communication scenarios in English. This finding goes hand in hand with the observation of Aldalur and Perez (2023). Their research observes that students are more motivated in gamified classes as they can have fun and feel positive. This makes them pay more attention in the class. They want this practice to be used in other subjects as well. Within this regard, it is suggested that gamification arouses students' interest in the academic subject matter (Alsadoon, Alkhawajah & Suhaim, 2022), and both motivation and learning achievement are important factors supporting optimal gamification learning (Zhang, Yu & Yu, 2021).

Meanwhile, several challenges impede the effectiveness of gamified language learning. It is observed that the negative competitive environment hinders the effectiveness of gamified English language learning modules in EFL education. These games must provide information and entertainment simultaneously. It must be adjusted to students' needs and characteristics (Zourmpakis, Papadakis & Kalogiannakis, 2022; Katsari & Vidakis, 2021). Time constraints also impact the successful integration of gamified modules into foreign language learning curricula. 72.6% of the respondents had this opinion. Another significant factor that impedes the effective conduct of gamified language learning is the technical difficulties in certain institutions. 71% of the students reported this difficulty. It is also worth noting that not even a single student stated that technical difficulties do not hinder effective gamified learning. It emphasizes the significance and necessity of a drastic change in higher education institutions. Lack of technology and internet access limit the effectiveness of gamified English language learning. 75.5% of students seconded this viewpoint.

Moreover, it is also identified that the technology addiction of students, their health, psychological issues, etc., pose a challenge to the effective implementation of gamified language learning in EFL education. This can be overcome with proper student motivation, which is possible through TI and TSR. Gamified language learning modules also provide opportunities for various learning styles. The interactive nature and flexibility of gamified modules to adapt to

the learners' strengths and weaknesses make such classes more interesting. It motivates the EFL learners. Research indicates that digital gamified language learning activities improve English language learners' language achievement (Loewen et al., 2019; Pham & Pham, 2022; Su & Zou, 2022).

Moreover, it is also observed that it significantly influences and promotes teacher-student rapport, teacher immediacy, and willingness to communicate. Studies state that effective TSR and TI are crucial factors that enhance student engagement and motivation, leading to improved language learning outcomes (Zhi & Wang, 2024). A model explicating the process of effective gamified teaching is given below.



Source: Figure created for this study

Figure 3: A simplified model of gamified EFL teaching

Conclusion

The primary objective of this research was to answer RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3. The analysis of the collected data made it clear that gamified English language learning modules strongly help enhance the students' English language proficiencyents. The research also analyzed the correlation and impact of gamification on TSR, TI, and students' WTC. The study revealed that gamified ELT modules help students improve their vocabulary acquisition level to a great extent. It helps them to understand jargon and enhances their technical communication skills. It fosters a supportive learning environment and increases WTC. It also promotes teacher enthusiasm and builds positive teacher-student rapport. Gamified EFL classes strengthen TSR and TI by providing opportunities for improvement, self-reflection, and feedback. Integrating gamification in foreign language teaching builds a more interactive, engaging, and effective learning experience, positively impacting TSR, TI, and WTC. Educators may incorporate general game design elements such as digital badges, leaderboards, challenges and quests, virtual currencies and rewards, collaborative tasks, progress bars, avatars, quizzes, role-playing, etc., in language classes. However, more complex gamification aspects, such as challenges, competition, and role-playing, may demand greater technical expertise, time commitments, and sophisticated design methodologies from users (Chan & Lo, 2024). Most of the challenges that arise in English-mediated instruction can be tackled with increased motivation. An effort to learn novel things can supplement it. These aspects will help educators design and implement appropriate gamified sessions in their English language classes.

Meanwhile, EFL educators face several implementation challenges while practicing gamification in real classroom scenarios. Time constraints, a negative competitive environment, lack of technology and internet access, technology addiction of students, etc., are a few such challenges. Since gamified classes significantly help students improve their language proficiency, higher education institutions shall promote such practices and provide sufficient training for teachers to conduct interactive gamified sessions for language learners.

Limitations and future research directions

Even though this study has numerous vital contributions, the results may be perceived in the light of certain drawbacks. The study sample was collected from 50 EFL teachers and 165 EFL students in various Tamil Nadu and Kerala higher education institutions. The teachers and the students marked their opinions based on subjective evaluation. More comprehensive and objective evaluation methods shall be employed for such studies. The researchers shall also collect data from more EFL teachers to increase the output's accuracy level. Another possibility is to conduct a detailed study on the impact of gamification on foreign language learners' listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Researchers can also compare the effectiveness of various gamification approaches on teacher-student relationships and language learning outcomes. They can also examine how gamification operates in varied educational settings such as blended, online, and traditional classrooms. Investigating the necessity of providing proper teacher training and assistance to integrate gamification in language classes is another significant domain that needs inquiry. The impact of gamification design elements on teacher-student dynamics and language learning and the potential advantages of merging gamification with other educational technologies like AI, VR, and AR to enhance language learning are other areas that require further exploration.

Abbreviations used: English Langauge Teaching (ELT); teacher-student rapport (TSR); teacher immediacy (TI); willingness to communicate (WTC); English as a Foreign Language (EFL); artificial intelligence (AI)

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