Gamification-based strategies to improve motivation in English learning in university students.

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Abstract

The phenomenon of globalization has consolidated English as a fundamental competence in academic, work and social contexts, demanding innovative strategies that promote motivation and effective learning. This study aims to analyze the impact of gamification-based strategies on the motivation of university students to learn English. To do this, a bibliographic review of research published between 2020 and 2024 in databases such as Scopus, Scielo and Google Scholar was carried out. The methodology included the qualitative analysis of studies that addressed the use of digital platforms and game dynamics, such as Kahoot, Quizizz, educational video games and reward systems, in university contexts. The results showed that gamification significantly increases students' motivation, participation and academic performance. In Mexico, the use of interactive platforms increased student participation by 35%; In Spain, 87% showed sustained interest in the activities over a semester, and in Colombia, a 20% improvement was recorded in vocabulary and grammar tests. These findings demonstrate that gamification transforms traditional environments into dynamic ones, facilitating more contextualized, collaborative and autonomous learning. In conclusion,

gamification is positioned as an effective pedagogical tool to improve motivation and results in English teaching, integrating technological and participatory elements that promote meaningful learning and respond to the educational demands of the 21st century.

Keywords:gamification, motivation, foreign language learning.

Introduction

The phenomenon of globalization has profoundly transformed the dynamics of interaction and communication in academic, work and social contexts. In this context, mastery of the English language has been consolidated as an essential competence, due to its role as a lingua franca in science, trade and international relations (Fernández, 2020). This panorama requires educational institutions to implement innovative strategies that not only guarantee effective learning, but also foster student motivation and commitment.

Currently, one of the most promising strategies in the educational field is gamification, defined as the use of game elements and mechanics in non-playful contexts to improve the learning experience (Kapp, 2012). In the case of learning English, gamification has proven to be effective in increasing student motivation, active participation and performance, critical factors in the acquisition of a foreign language (Orihuela, 2019).

Interest in gamification in education has grown exponentially in recent years, especially in university contexts, where students face multiple challenges that affect their intrinsic motivation. According to recent research, game-based strategies can transform traditional learning environments into more dynamic and interactive spaces, promoting meaningful and lasting learning (Cerda, 2018). However, there are gaps in the literature regarding its specific implementation for teaching English, which poses a valuable research opportunity.

In this context, this article aims to analyze gamification-based strategies that contribute to improving motivation in English learning among university students. It focuses on

identifying tools, methods and good practices that have proven to be effective, evaluating their impact on academic performance and on students' perception of the learning process.

The scope of this study is limited to the analysis of research published between 2020 and 2024 in high-impact indexed journals, such as Scopus and Scielo. In addition, work that specifically addresses the use of digital platforms, applications, and game dynamics designed for university contexts is prioritized. In this way, the review is limited to practical and contextualized approaches that can be replicated in higher education institutions.

The analysis also includes a critical review of studies that highlight the challenges associated with the implementation of gamification, such as resistance to change on the part of teachers and students, as well as the need for adequate technological resources (Hernández, 2021). These perspectives allow not only to identify the strengths of this strategy, but also to propose recommendations to overcome obstacles and optimize its application in the educational field.

The findings of this article seek to contribute to the development of innovative pedagogical practices that respond to the demands of the 21st century. In this sense, gamification is positioned as a key tool to transform the teaching of English, integrating technological and participatory elements that enhance autonomous and collaborative learning. It is proposed not only as a synthesis of the most relevant research on the subject, but also as a guide for teachers and designers of educational programs who wish to incorporate gamification as an effective strategy in the teaching of English in university contexts.

Several studies have documented the positive impact of gamification strategies on English language learning in university contexts. For example, research conducted at a university in Mexico shows that the use of platforms such as Kahoot and Duolingo increased student motivation and engagement by 35% compared to traditional methods (Sánchez et al.,

2022). Similarly, a study conducted in Spain implemented dynamics based on obtaining virtual rewards and leaderboards, resulting in 87% of students showing sustained interest in learning activities for a full semester (Martínez & López, 2021). Furthermore, in Colombia, the incorporation of personalized educational video games for learning English allowed students to achieve an average improvement of 20% in vocabulary and grammar tests (Gómez & Ramírez, 2023). These data demonstrate that gamification not only improves intrinsic motivation, but also contributes significantly to academic outcomes, positioning it as a key pedagogical tool to meet the challenges of foreign language learning in the 21st century.

Methods and materials

In this literature review article, the application of gamification-based strategies to improve motivation in English learning in university students was analyzed. To do so, an exhaustive search was carried out for academic studies published between 2020 and 2024 in scientific databases such as Scopus, Scielo and Google Scholar. The inclusion criteria for the studies considered were those that addressed the use of gamification in educational contexts for teaching foreign languages, with a focus on the motivation of university students. Various sources were used, such as research articles, theses and case studies, to obtain a broad view on the impact of game dynamics on learning English.

Qualitative analysis techniques were used to synthesize the main conclusions drawn from the reviewed studies. The methodology consisted of identifying the most common gamification strategies, such as the use of digital platforms (Kahoot, Duolingo, among others) and the implementation of elements such as rewards, upgrades, and competitions, to evaluate their effectiveness in increasing student motivation. The findings revealed that gamification significantly improves student engagement and interest, especially in those with low levels of initial motivation (Sánchez et al., 2022; Martínez & López, 2021). In turn, the studies identify

the importance of adapting gamification strategies to the characteristics of the university context and the specific needs of students (Gómez & Ramírez, 2023).

Analysis of results

The results derived from the literature review on the application of gamification-based strategies to improve motivation in learning English in university students are presented. Based on studies carried out between 2020 and 2024, the findings suggest that gamification, by integrating dynamics and mechanics of games in the classroom, has a positive impact on students' motivation and interest. Various studies show that the use of platforms such as Kahoot and Duolingo, which incorporate elements of competition and reward, contributes to increasing student participation and maintaining their interest during the English learning process (Sánchez, 2022; Martínez & López, 2021). This approach allows students to experience learning in a more dynamic and engaging way, which improves their willingness to actively participate in activities.

The reviewed literature indicates that gamification strategies are particularly effective for those students with low levels of intrinsic motivation, who often experience difficulties in staying focused on traditional teaching tasks. According to Gómez & Ramírez (2023), the use of gamification not only increases motivation but also facilitates learning in students who are not attracted to conventional educational methods. The competition, constant feedback, and rewards implemented in gamified activities manage to capture students' attention and foster their interest in learning English.

A key result is the identification of language skills that directly benefit from gamification. Studies show that activities designed with gamification contribute to the development of all four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, it is highlighted that speaking and writing skills benefit the most, as gamified activities usually

involve active communication tasks, such as role-playing and debates. According to Oradee (2012), these types of activities not only promote language practice, but also help students overcome psychological barriers and develop the confidence needed to communicate in English.

In relation to the above, studies also underline the importance of adapting gamification strategies to the context and characteristics of students. The flexibility of gamification allows teachers to design activities that respond to the particular needs of each group of students, considering factors such as their level of knowledge, their interests and their learning style. The personalization of these strategies significantly improves learning outcomes, as students feel more connected to the content and the proposed activities (Sánchez, 2015; Kapp, 2012).

On the other hand, the results also reflect that the implementation of gamification requires a well-planned and structured approach by teachers. According to Werbach & Hunter (2012), for gamification to be effective, it is necessary to clearly define the learning objectives, outline the expected attitudes of the students and design the sequencing of the activities. In addition, teachers must ensure that the tools and platforms used are appropriate for the type of students to whom the teaching is directed, which implies a constant evaluation of the process and adjustments based on the results obtained.

Finally, it will be verified that gamification also favors the acquisition of transversal competences such as teamwork, cooperation and problem solving, these aspects are crucial not only for learning English, but also for the development of social and cognitive skills that students need in their academic and professional life, the elements of cooperation and competition, fundamental in game dynamics, offer opportunities for students to interact with each other, share ideas and solve challenges collaboratively, which enriches their learning experience (Deterding et al., 2011; Herranz & Herranz, 2013).

Gamification is presented as a highly effective strategy to improve motivation and learning of English in university students, especially when it is adapted to the characteristics and needs of the students. The findings reveal that the implementation of gamified strategies contributes to the development of linguistic skills, promotes active participation and improves students' confidence in their ability to communicate in English. To ensure their effectiveness, teachers must carefully plan the activities, making sure that they are aligned with the learning objectives and are appropriate for the educational context in which they are applied.

Table 1: Effective Gamification Strategies

Strategy	Description	Implementation example	Benefits for Students
Use of interactive platforms	Tools like Kahoot!, Quizizz, and Duolingo allow you to create games and tests that make learning more dynamic.	Take interactive quizzes on Kahoot! or vocabulary exercises on Duolingo.	It improves motivation, encourages healthy competition and facilitates the repetition of concepts.
Role-playing games and simulations.	Students take on characters or situations that allow them to actively practice the language.	Simulation of job interviews or role-playing of everyday situations (e.g. in a restaurant).	It develops communication skills and allows you to apply the language in real contexts.
Skills and challenges	They encourage healthy competition through group or individual challenges.	Vocabulary, grammar or pronunciation competitions with prizes for the best performance.	Increase participation, create a motivating environment and encourage interaction between students.
Rewards and achievements	Points, badges or leaderboards to recognize effort.	Points awarded for completed tasks, achievements, and appearance on a weekly leaderboard.	It reinforces intrinsic motivation and sense of achievement, encouraging students to continually improve.

Instant feedback	Provide immediate feedback on student performance in real time.	Tools such as online quizzes that provide instant correct answers or feedback on assignments.	It improves autonomous learning, allows for quick corrections, and increases motivation by knowing what needs to be improved.

Note: Gamification-based strategies to improve motivation in English learning in university students.

Gamification-based strategies, such as the use of interactive platforms, role-playing games, competitions, rewards, and instant feedback, prove to be highly effective in improving university students' motivation in learning English. The use of tools such as Kahoot or Duolingo encourages active participation and facilitates the repetition of concepts in a fun way, while simulations and role-playing games allow students to practice the language in real situations, improving their communication skills. Competitions and challenges promote a motivating environment by encouraging healthy competition, while rewards and achievements reinforce intrinsic motivation by recognizing efforts and achievements. Furthermore, instant feedback contributes to the quick correction of errors and improves autonomous learning. Together, these strategies not only increase participation, but also boost students' confidence and promote more dynamic and meaningful language learning.

The implementation of gamification in foreign language learning, as presented by the authors, is characterized by integrating dynamics, mechanics and components that motivate student interaction, facilitating their learning in virtual environments. Table 2 summarizes the main elements and their specific contributions to the educational process. This analysis shows that gamification not only enhances students' interest and motivation, but also improves their language skills by encouraging continuous and meaningful learning.

Table 2.

Analysis of Results on Gamification and Virtual Learning Environments

Element	Description	Educational contribution
Dynamics	Effects and motivations as emotions and social relationships	Promotes attention, curiosity and teamwork.
Mechanics	Challenges, rewards, cooperation and feedback	They generate commitment, active interaction and performance improvement.
Components	Achievements, levels, leaderboards, virtual goods	They promote competitiveness and self-regulation.
Virtual Environments (EVA)	Platforms that integrate technological tools for learning.	They facilitate distance education and encourage autonomy.

Virtual Environments (EVA) Platforms that integrate technological tools for learning. They facilitate distance education and encourage autonomy.

Secondly, it is observed that virtual learning environments (VLEs) play a crucial role by providing digital tools adapted for gamification. These environments allow the integration of mixed methodologies such as b-learning and m-learning, which maximise interaction and access to content. The flexibility of VLEs is essential to overcome time and space barriers, allowing students to participate in gamified activities in a dynamic and effective way.

Game-based learning stands out as a strategy that combines fun with the acquisition of knowledge and values. The structured use of games in educational environments fosters fundamental skills such as decision-making, observation and empathy, while promoting the axiological formation of students. In this context, it is concluded that gamification, supported

by virtual environments, constitutes a powerful tool to transform teaching, particularly in language education, by guaranteeing motivation, commitment and significant results.

Figure 1.

Eight advantages of game-based learning

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The constant search for improving educational quality has led to the development and use of various methodological strategies that seek to optimize the results in the teaching-learning process. In this context, gamification emerges as a methodological trend that has gained ground in the educational field. It is important to highlight that this term is not entirely new, since it has been present in the daily life of classrooms, being applied spontaneously in different educational activities. However, what is currently proposed is a conscious and structured use of gamification, whose main purpose is to promote meaningful learning. This implies designing educational scenarios that favor the development of skills and knowledge in students.

According to Sánchez Quishpe (2018), gamification can be defined as a learning technique that adopts the dynamics of games and transfers them to the educational or professional field. This with the aim of achieving better results, either through the acquisition of new knowledge, the improvement of specific skills or the motivation to carry out specific tasks, among other relevant objectives. Currently, technological advances have favored the implementation of innovative teaching-learning strategies. These allow the creation of more dynamic and participatory educational environments, in which students assume an active role in their own training process. Gamification, as an educational method, incorporates playful and competitive elements that transform classrooms into spaces where learning is developed in a more effective and motivating way, thus ensuring better educational results.

Conclusion

The implementation of gamification-based strategies in English language teaching has shown a significant impact on university students' motivation and engagement. Game dynamics, such as levels, challenges, rewards, and immediate feedback systems, create an engaging and competitive learning environment. These strategies allow students to feel more involved in their learning process, by turning complex tasks into playful and stimulating activities that maintain their interest and reduce the perception of effort.

Gamified tools and activities, such as Kahoot, Quizizz, virtual platforms, and role-playing games, promote more active and collaborative learning among students. This approach facilitates peer interaction and the development of teamwork skills, while reinforcing linguistic concepts and knowledge. By participating in competitive and cooperative activities, students become more engaged in classes and achieve meaningful learning, building their knowledge in a dynamic way.

Gamified strategies not only boost motivation, but also contribute to the comprehensive development of English language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Activities such as vocabulary games, problem-solving missions and simulations allow students to practice the language in a contextualized and natural way. In particular, strategies focused on speaking and group interaction boost fluency and confidence when communicating in English.

The integration of gamification elements in English teaching has been shown to improve students' academic performance by making the learning process more engaging and effective. Interactive and personalized experiences through technological resources manage to capture students' attention, helping them overcome barriers such as lack of confidence or fear of making mistakes. This contributes to a more enriching educational experience, where students perceive learning English as a dynamic, accessible and motivating process.

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