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Fostering Oral Skills in English through Gamification

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Abstract

This action research study conducted at a public institution in Medellin was aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of gamification strategies to foster eighth graders' oral production in English by means of the mother tongue as a learning resource. Data were collected through a research journal, audio-recordings, a points format for the gamification activities, a focus group, and an interview with the cooperating teacher of the institution. Data analysis demonstrates the effectiveness of games to foster the students' oral production in English because it provides students with opportunities to practice the target language in a safe environment. Evidence also shows that this strategy has additional benefits in students' learning process such as competitiveness, confidence, and engagement. Regarding the mother tongue, it was found that it is useful for the students' learning of the target language because it provides them with a tool for overcoming language difficulties. It is important to highlight that under different circumstances related to the context, the positive impact could have been higher.

Key words: gamification, target language, confidence, competitiveness, engagement

Degree Requirement

This action research project is submitted as a requirement of the Bachelor of Education in

Teaching Foreign Languages (English-French) at the Escuela de Idiomas, Universidad de

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Table of Contents

Preface

For as long as I can remember, I have been a fan of games. From board games with my family or friends to video games on the PC and the cellphone, it is something that entertains me. When I realized that these students needed a strategy to improve their English oral skills, I thought it had to be something fun, something that would motivate them to learn and get involved in their learning process; that was when I concluded that games seemed like a perfect strategy.

The possibility of teaching in an interactive, dynamic, and fun way was what raised my interest in games. That is why after some theoretical research, I discovered this concept of gamification which perfectly fit with what I wanted to do. I considered the potential of this strategy because students were at an age in which they had the most energy and desire to do fun things. For this reason, I used gamification strategies to provide students with a safe and competitive atmosphere where they could improve their English oral skills, have fun, and engage with their learning process at the same time.

Description of the Context

Institución Educativa Antonio Derka Santo Domingo is located in the city of Medellin, more specifically in Santo Domingo Savio neighborhood. In 2008, former mayor Sergio Fajardo proposed a public policy called "Medellín, la más educada" which resulted in the creation of a high-quality school with contributions from one of the most important companies in the city, Empresas Públicas de Medellín (EPM). This institution offers preschool, primary, secondary, high school, technical high school in cooperation with Servicio Nacional de Aprendizaje (SENA) and adult education (CLEI). In addition, this institution comprises four educational centers: Santo Domingo, Antonio Derka, Carpinelo Amapolita and Antonio Derka Santo Domingo where this action research project was implemented. It is important to highlight that this neighborhood has been heavily affected by social issues such as violence, drugs, and poverty. In fact, the institution is sitting on an "invisible border" controlled by illegal groups, a situation that affects the students' academic performance.

Antonio Derka is a public institution that conceives the Institutional Educational Project (PEI) as a constant process of reflection and collective construction, which opens spaces for the participation among the different members of the educational community. Regarding its mission, they follow humanistic and ethical principles to offer education with academic and technical quality. They intend to form competent citizens capable of assuming the construction of their life project and the transformation of the society as well as the environment. As for its vision, this institution aims to be a leader in integral education, democratic principles, respect for differences, scientific potential, and technical and academic programs. This objective is expected to be achieved through learning communities and technologies focused on innovation, research,

multiculturalism, leadership, and inclusion, which will facilitate the integration of its alumni into higher education and professional life.

The entire institution has over 3000 students, who are distributed in ninety-six groups among the different centers. The main center, Antonio Derka Santo Domingo hosts thirty of these groups, more than a quarter of the total population of the institution. According to the PEI, this site is equipped with Wi-Fi and has some facilities such as a library, three computer rooms, a room for natural resources, a play center, and some green areas. However, there are few resources for the English classes, a situation that forces the teachers to implement a traditional methodology on most occasions.

Concerning the teaching of English, the students of the Antonio Derka Santo Domingo center take three hours of this subject a week. These classes are taught following the Colombia Bilingue program and the Basic Learning Rights proposed by the Ministry of National Education (MEN). According to the institution, the methodological approach they have adopted is focused on tasks and projects for intermediate grades such as eighth, ninth and tenth grades. In addition, the institution has adopted certain strategies for English teaching such as the spelling bee, the singing contest, didactic games, conversation clubs, and flash cards, among others.

The cooperating teacher is a professional translator of English and French graduated from the University of Antioquia. He has eleven years of experience as a teacher and has taught at the language program of Comfenalco. He has also worked at Instituto Tecnológico Metropolitano (ITM) and at this public school where he has taught for seven years. The cooperating teacher likes to use Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) as a methodology for his classes; however, he is aware that it is difficult to apply TBLT with these learners due to their low level of English.

This project was carried out with a mixed 33-group of eighth-grade students, but with a regular attendance of fewer than 30. The students are teenagers between twelve and fifteen years old, who belong to the neighborhoods near the educational institution. Regarding English learning, all of the students have a low level of the language, and think that it is a difficult subject. Nevertheless, most of them have a positive and optimistic view of the language since they see it as something important and useful for their future.

Statement of the Problem

In the process of learning a new language in an EFL context, it is crucial to provide students with enough opportunities to use the foreign language within the classroom. Although the use of the first language in the acquisition of a foreign language may be viewed negatively, the reality is that the appropriate use of this strategy can encourage the learning of the foreign language in the classroom. Nevertheless, from the first moment I started my observations at the educational institution Antonio Derka Santo Domingo as a pre-service teacher, I realized that these eighth grade students hardly ever use English during their classes. They preferred to use their mother tongue all the time which is understandable taking into consideration the little exposure they had to the foreign language. Their English classes were usually focused on writing components; they rarely conducted oral activities. In order to collect sufficient evidence of this situation, I collected information through field journals of my observations, a questionnaire to the students and an informal interview with the cooperating teacher.

My first contact with this issue was in a class observation that I conducted on March 7th. In this class the use of the mother tongue was extremely predominant throughout the class, the students did not even attempt to express themselves in English. In addition, the teacher's explanations were entirely in Spanish, except for the times when he had to read phrases or words

in English. At that time, I expected that this situation would be temporary and that it would be better for future classes, but the situation did not change at all. In fact, in a class observation of March 21st, the use of the mother tongue was again predominant and repetitive throughout the class. It was not different from the other classes I had observed: the learners did not even try to say short phrases or simple words in English and the opportunities they had to improve this seemed to be scarce.

In one of the reflections of my journal I wrote that although it may seem that students did not use English during classes because they lacked interest or motivation, the real situation was that they did not use it because they did not know how to. Moreover, through my observations I learned that these eighth graders were not acquiring a true and lasting knowledge of the language. The activities developed in the course were not helping the students to really engage with the foreing language either, since they tended to be decontextualized activities where the learners did not see the necessity to use the language because they were not provided with opportunities to do so.

I conducted an informal interview with the cooperating teacher to find out his opinions about some issues related with the class and his students. In this interview, the teacher highlighted his beliefs about the use of the foreign language in his classes and was positive about the strategy of games as a useful tool to achieve this purpose. Firstly, I found out that from the cooperating teacher's perspective, the learners did not use the foreign language due to a lack of interest, since they perceived the English course only as a mandatory subject. Additionally, even though the teacher's classes usually followed a sequence, which is very important for learning since students are always intertwining topics, he argued that the students had not improved their

English skills for the same reason: lack of interest. At the end of the interview, he expressed that games seem to be an excellent strategy because many of these learners like to work in groups.

In order to collect information about the students' perceptions of foreign language learning and their learning preferences, I developed a questionnaire that was anonymously answered by 27 eighth graders. One of these questions focused on whether the students liked English and why they thought it was important or not; 22 students stated that they liked English and most of them considered it was important to learn the language because of its usefulness for their future. The questionnaire also included a question about how much the students understood when the teacher spoke in English. This was a closed-ended question with 3 choices: almost everything, something, nothing. Their answers revealed that a large majority of the participants (77%) just understood "something" when the teacher spoke in English, which was worrisome considering that the cooperating teacher only said isolated words or simple sentences.

Additionally, the learners were asked if they frequently used the new vocabulary that they learned. With respect to the answers, the participants' responses were divided: 51 % expressed they did, while the other 49% said that they did not. On the one hand, the students who answered affirmatively argued that they easily memorized these words to avoid forgetting them. On the other hand, those students who answered negatively highlighted the fact that it was not necessary since they did not have to use the words outside the classroom. Regarding the type of modality they preferred, 85 % of the participants expressed an inclination toward group work over individual work. This questionnaire reflects that although some students may not be interested in English, most of them do not involve themselves with it as they do not have a safe and interactive space to do so. All the above demonstrates the presence of a situation related to little use of the foreign language that can be improved. Bearing this in mind, I think that the

implementation of gamification strategies may be a potential way for them to increase the use of the foreign language supported by the mother tongue as a learning tool.

Theoretical Background

Games are present in our daily lives. They are used for entertainment because everybody feels the need to have fun. Although they are more common among younger populations, adults also use them to spend free time. Additionally, games can be adapted to other contexts such as work, education, and health. In this section, I will present the concepts that guide this research project. First, I will focus on the concept of gamification and its role in foreign language teaching to subsequently discuss the importance of using the mother tongue as a resource to learn the target language.

Gamification

According to Ahmed et al. (2022), gamification refers to a social phenomenon that is emerging among a generation of people who are technologically skillful (p. 3). Although the notion of gamification began to appear in 2010 and it is relatively new, it has existed in many areas of life for as long as civilization has existed. Moreover, this concept can be used in many different contexts. According to these authors, "gamification now refers to a problem-solving strategy that employs game features and game-design techniques in traditionally non-game contexts" (p. 2). This definition highlights gamification as a strategy where the techniques and features of a game are used to achieve a purpose.

Regarding gamification in education, Reinhardt (2019, as cited in Waer, 2021) states that gamification is the use of game elements in non-game contexts, such as courses, classes, and lessons (p. 549). For instance, typical game elements include points, leaderboards, progress bars, performance graphs, quests, meaningful stories, and avatars (Waer, 2021, p. 549). Therefore, the

occasions in which teachers use game elements to teach a subject to his students can be defined as the implementation of gamification in education.

Nevertheless, when we refer to the use of games in classroom activities, we are not only referring to physical and face-to-face dynamics, but also to the large number of digital platforms that use game elements for education. Tan (2018, as cited in Redjeki & Muhajir, 2021), asserts that gamification is "an innovative pedagogical technique or strategy in which digital games are applied in an educational environment and as a learning tool" (p. 69). In this case, teachers can implement gamification activities through online learning platforms and game-based platforms; among the most used are Kahoot, Quizizz, Moodle and Quizlet.

As for gamification in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, over the years strategies have been developed to teach English in innovative ways, old methods are becoming obsolete in a world where education is constantly changing. One of the techniques recently developed is gamification. In this respect, Redjeki and Muhajir (2021) state that, it is an innovative and engaging way to learn English which allows the students to feel motivated towards the achievement of their learning goals (p. 69). Using gamification in foreign language learning gives students the opportunity to learn in a more exciting and engaging way. Additionally, Ahmed et al., (2022) claim that this strategy can be used to motivate learners by allowing them to practice the language more efficiently as they acquire important skills to solve different tasks (p .2).

Another benefit of using gamification in an EFL classroom is the environment that is created for the practice of the language. In this respect, Ahmed et al., (2022) claim that gamification helps students to interact and communicate without any barriers within a social atmosphere (p. 2). As a result, interaction among students is achieved through a safe space which

is mediated through the implementation of this strategy. Regarding the classroom environment, they state that the competitive atmosphere created by the use of gamification in the classroom is an important element in students' English language learning (p. 3). Consequently, the environment that is created within the classroom is not only safe and friendly for the students, but also competitive to encourage their participation in such games.

As a result of the constant evolution of technology in language teaching, gamification could also be placed within technology-enhanced language learning (TELL). According to Zhou and Wei (2018, as cited in Waer, 2021) TELL is defined as "any language learning activity that uses technological means and/or tools for efficiency, motivation, and learning style flexibility" (p. 551). This makes gamification an innovative and more attractive trend than a non-game context in foreign language teaching since it involves a safe and fun environment as well as the possibility of using technological platforms for the practice of the foreign language.

Regarding gamification for learning a foreign language, a mixed-method research study was carried out by Waer (2021), with the objective of determining the effect that the use of gamification had on the acquisition of new vocabulary in English. This study was carried out in Egypt with 68 students between 18 and 19 years old from the New Valley University. Students were randomly assigned to a control group (33) and an experimental group (35), over a period of seven weeks. The experimental group used Quizizz as a strategy to practice the vocabulary whereas the control group used paper-based sheets for the same purpose. Data were collected through a vocabulary test (APTIS) developed by British Council experts in language testing, an attitude questionnaire designed by the researcher, learning logs, follow-up interviews and Quizizz.

The quantitative results of this study showed that at the beginning of the study both groups had a similar vocabulary test score with less than 10. However, after the implementation of the study, it was found that the experimental group had a score increase of more than 15 while the control group barely reached the score of 10. In addition, qualitative results demonstrated through interviews what students thought of the use of gamification in vocabulary learning. Some participants expressed that the method added to their vocabulary stock, and it helped them learn a lot of new words. Therefore, the results revealed that the group of students who used gamification in vocabulary learning far outperformed those who used vocabulary paper sheets. Moreover, the data obtained from the questionnaires and interviews showed that most of the students had a positive attitude towards the use of gamification in vocabulary learning.

Use of the Mother Tongue as a Resource to Learn the Target Language

Over the years, a debate regarding the use of the mother tongue (L1) in language teaching has emerged. In this respect, there are mainly two perspectives: those who believe that the mother tongue can be used as a tool to learn a foreign language, and others who claim that the use of the mother tongue is only an impediment for learning it (Debreli & Oyman, 2015, p. 148).

Concerning the supporters of foreign language exclusivity in second language learning, they argue that the use of the first language can reduce the amount of input to which learners are exposed. According to Polio and Duff, (1994, as cited in Cuartas, 2013) those who advocate for monolingualism when learning another language state that, only the target language (L2) should be used for teaching and learning within the classroom, since the use of the first language limits the quantity of input that learners are exposed to in the foreign language class (p. 139). Following the thread of the arguments against the use of L1, Littlewood and Yu, (2011, as cited

in Debreli & Oyman, 2015) claim that encouraging the use of the first language to acquire the L2 does not help learners, but may result in a transfer of bad habits from L1 to L2. (p. 149).

Notwithstanding the opposing arguments mentioned above, there are many other arguments in favor of the beneficial use of the mother tongue as a resource for learning the target language. For instance, Atkinson (1987, as cited in Cuartas, 2013) mentions favorable uses such as eliciting language, checking comprehension, giving instructions, encouraging cooperation among learners, and checking for sense (p. 140). Moreover, a strong argument of those who support the use of the mother tongue is that L1 and L2 are inseparable. In this respect, Timor (2012) states that "the process of foreign language acquisition involves cognitive, social, and emotional factors that are inseparable and equally related to the MT [mother tongue] and the FL [foreign language]" (p. 9).

Additionally, the use of the mother tongue is a great benefit for those students who are just beginning to interact with English. Schweers (1999, as cited in Paker & Karaağaç, 2015) mentions that "starting with the L1 provides a sense of security and validates the learners' lived experiences, allowing them to express themselves. The learner is then willing to experiment and take risks with English" (p. 112). For English beginners, a very common factor that affects their learning process is shame. In this respect, Galmiche (2018) states that feeling shame is an emotion that minimizes the self. In addition, this feeling is usually accompanied by feelings such as worthlessness, exposure to others' gaze, and concern about revealing a flawed self (p. 102). Therefore, through the use of the mother tongue, students can use English more confidently by reducing their inhibitions and emotional barriers (Cuartas, 2013, p. 140).

An action research project was conducted by Cuartas (2013) with the aim of examining the improvement of students' English learning processes through the selective use of their mother

tongues. This study was carried out in an all-girls public school in Medellin, Colombia and involved forty ninth-grade students. The instruments used to collect data were field notes from all of the classes observed and taught, two questionnaires, audio-recordings of two structured interviews with the CT, and audio-recordings of three semi-structured focus group interviews.

The results of this study were presented in two different categories: the students' use of L1 and the teachers' use of L1. Concerning students, data analysis showed that L1 helps students to understand and acquire English vocabulary by providing an effective tool for cross-linguistic analysis. In addition, it was shown that the use of the first language played a guiding role in the learning of the foreign language, which facilitated the students' understanding of English. Furthermore, the data revealed that the mother tongue increased learners' confidence in using the L2 in the EFL classroom, allowing them to moderately resort to the L1 in some activities as a way to overcome their nervousness or other difficulties when expressing themselves in English. Regarding teachers, the data demonstrated that the teacher's selective use of the MT to provide meaning and accurate translations helped students understand and learn L2 vocabulary. Moreover, it was evidenced that when the teacher was giving explanations the selective use of L1 played an important role in clarifying and resolving students' doubts. Finally, it was found that the teacher's selective use of L1 provided affective support to learners during lessons through accompanying, scaffolding, and caring from the teacher to the students.

Research Question

To what extent can gamification strategies foster eighth graders' oral production in English by means of the mother tongue as a resource?

General Objective

To evaluate the effectiveness of gamification strategies to foster eighth graders' oral production in English by means of the mother tongue as a learning resource.

Specific Objectives

To modify the students' perspective about the difficulties involved in learning the L2.

To provide students with a safe classroom environment where they can fearlessly use English orally.

To implement alternative activities that lead them to interact in English.

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Action Plan

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In order to find out to what extent the implementation of gamification strategies could foster eighth graders' oral production in English by means of the mother tongue as a resource, I designed an action plan that would take place at the above-mentioned institution. The intention of this plan was to observe and analyze whether students would be able to begin to develop their oral production skills through the gamification strategies I would implement.

I first planned a socialization with the students and the teacher about my research proposal to let them know what the project was about, and its objectives. In addition, since I would analyze the data obtained from the students, I provided them with a consent form, in which those who wished to participate in the project would give me their permission to use the data for academic purposes. I also planned a questionnaire that may provide me with relevant information about the students' perceptions and readiness to begin using English orally and the strategy we would use.

Throughout the semester, I would write a research journal to describe and reflect on the activities developed in class. With this journal I expected to build an important source of

information through reflections on students' attitudes, engagement, improvement, participation, and evolution of their oral skills in English. All the information I would collect through this tool would be important to answer the research question of this project.

The main strategy — gamification activities— would be carried out throughout the semester. I planned to implement at least 6 activities related to gamification strategies taking into account the school syllabus proposed for the English subject. The classes would be guided by games to provide a space for students to use the foreign language, orally. It would be a sequence of activities to have a record of their evolution from one activity to the other. For data collection purposes, I would use audio recordings as the main instrument to know how much the students actively participated in the class and used the foreign language to develop the activities. To register this information, I designed a points format to know how often the students used the target language. Through the audio recordings, I would identify which students used English orally and a number of points would be assigned to them; this would also allow me to have a quantitative source for the analysis.

Finally, I would collect relevant information for my project through a focus group and an interview with the cooperating teacher. The focus group would be with 6-9 students, to obtain their perspective about the strategy implemented and the extent to which it helped them to improve their oral skills in English. I would choose these students taking into consideration three criteria: 3 students with outstanding performance, 3 students with average performance and 3 students with low performance. The interview with the cooperating teacher was aimed at knowing his perspectives about the strategy implemented and the students' evolution in the English class.

Development of Actions

In order to explore the usefulness of gamification strategies to foster the use of the foreign language by means of the mother tongue as a resource, I implemented some actions that will be presented in the following lines. I will also refer to those actions that could not be conducted as planned, for external reasons that were not under my control.

The first stage in this implementation was the socialization of the proposal with the students and the teacher. This activity was conducted as a conversation with the participants in which I presented the dynamics that we would follow throughout the semester. I also explained the concept of gamification and how it would be implemented in the English class. The students were attentive to my explanation and asked some questions about the gamification activities, the points, the recordings, and some other relevant information. In order to have authorization from the participants to analyze the data collected, I gave them a consent form and we read it together for them to ask questions if they had any doubt. Most of them agreed to participate and signed the consent form. These activities were planned for the first week of classes, but due to a situation of violence in the area where the school is located, it was postponed until the third week.

I had also planned to conduct a questionnaire to the students to inquire about their perceptions of English as a foreign language, the use of the native language in the English class and the interest in games, but unfortunately it could not be conducted since class time was considerably reduced due to the situation mentioned above.

As soon as I started the implementation, I began registering some relevant information about the project in my research diary. After each gamification activity, I wrote an entry consisting of a descriptive part and a reflective part. The descriptive part accounted for the

different situations that I observed during the development of the class activities as well as the students' reactions to it. I registered positive and negative situations that took place and were worth revising. The reflective part included expected and unexpected situations that occurred and needed to be changed or reinforced. These reflections were important as they allowed me to analyze the failures and successes and make modifications for future classes.

In relation to the main strategy, I had planned to develop 6 gamification strategies every 2 weeks, but time was a constant constraint in my project because students missed a lot of classes. Most of the time we only met 1 hour a week, in which it was not possible to develop a gamification activity as it required at least two hours. For this reason, I could only develop half of these activities. As mentioned above, I expected to do these activities every two weeks, but unfortunately, after the first gamification activity in the first week of September, I could not implement more until the last week of October when I did two activities in a row. These gamification activities were aimed at fostering the oral production of the students; therefore, they were recorded to analyze their evolution throughout the semester.

To compare and validate the information of the research journal, the audio recordings, and the points format, I conducted a focus group with 6 volunteer students. Originally, I had planned to choose the students based on performance criteria, but it was not possible due to few gamification activities I could implement. With these 6 students, I had an audio-recorded conversation in which I asked them about their perceptions, feelings and opinions about the gamification activities and their effect on the use of the foreign language. Moreover, I had an interview with the cooperating teacher to know his opinions about the project. In that interview, the teacher talked about how he perceived his students during the activities and his impressions about the project, in general.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed following the process proposed by Burns (2009), which comprises 5 stages: assembling the data, coding the data, comparing the data, building interpretations, and reporting the outcomes. In the first stage, I organized the data obtained through a research journal, audio recordings, a points format for the games, a focus group, and an interview with the cooperating teacher by saving them in folders that were labeled with their corresponding names. As the amount of data was large, I carried out the second stage to reduce it by assigning codes and classifying them into categories. With the data coded and categorized, I conducted the third stage to find patterns within the data. In the fourth stage, I started to connect the findings obtained from the data with the theory that guided this action research to make interpretations. In the following section I will present the last stage; that is, the findings supported by the evidence and the interpretations that I made based on the evidence and the theory.

Findings and Interpretations

Data analysis yielded interesting outcomes about the effectiveness of gamification strategies to foster students' oral production in L2, some additional benefits in terms of affective factors, and the use of L1 as a tool to understand the target language. In the following lines, I will elaborate on these findings in detail and make connections with the theoretical concepts presented above.

Effectiveness of Gamification on Students' Use of the Target Language

According to Ahmed et al., (2022), gamification is a strategy used to motivate learners as it allows them to practice the language more effectively and acquire important skills in the process. Evidence of this was the gamification activities implemented in which students were

provided with opportunities to practice their English, something they did not use to do before.

For instance, the first gamification activity consisted of a pair competition in which one of the

students described a house from an image they had been given before, and the other student had

to draw or write the description without looking at the image. The students had a time limit and

when it was over, the pair that described the house more accurately was the winner. In this

activity, the total number of students who produced sentences in English was 8 out of 21 as it can

be observed in figure 1. Although it may seem a low number, it is important to point out that it

was the first gamification activity that was implemented. Student T, for instance, produced the

following sentences in his first participation: "There is one home office, There is one bedroom,

There is one bathroom, There is one kitchen, There is one dining room, There is one living

room" as it was evident in the first audio-recording transcription. In addition, the students

demonstrated willingness to use English during the activity even though sometimes they did not

know the vocabulary, making incomplete sentences or saying isolated words. An example of this

is what Student Y said in one of his participations: "There is one…?, Bedroom o bathroom?,

One kitchen".

Figure 1

Oral Production in gamification activity #1 (GA-1)
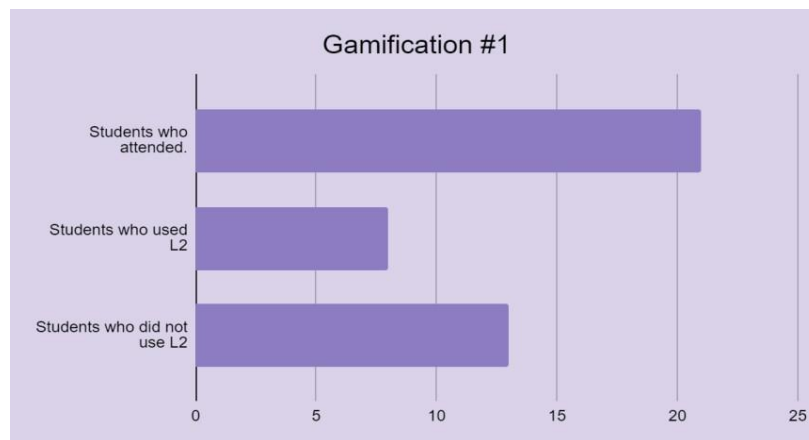
In the second gamification activity (see Appendix), students competed 1 to 1 to earn points for their groups. For the game, they were asked an information question –What are these?– and they had to answer using the correct demonstrative pronouns. In addition, they had a toy that made a sound in their seats and the first student who pressed it could answer; in case they answered incorrectly, the other student had a chance to answer. On this occasion, the number of students who used L2 orally was 15 out of 28 as observed in figure 2. Some examples of the sentences they produced are, "This is tip, Those are three flowers" (Student Z), "These are two spolites, This is a midrib, Those are two base" (Student X), and "This is blade, Those are four root, Those are three leaves, Those are two steam" (Student K).

Figure 2

Oral Production in gamification activity #2 (GA-2)
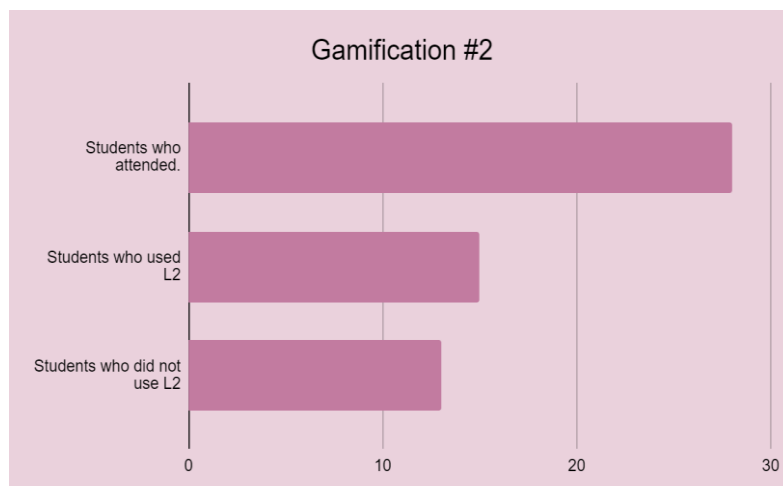
The third and last gamification activity was very similar to the previous one in terms of oral production in English. A total of 16 students out of 26 used the target language as observed in figure 3. This game consisted in a search, where the students had to find the images and then say how many of them were in the classroom; the student who answered correctly won points for

his or her group. Some examples of complete and incomplete sentences that the students produced during this activity are the following: Student E: "This is one… this is three" Student A: "This is leaf, What are two fruits" and Student M: "There is one orbicular, There is one cuneate, There are two orbicular"

Figure 3

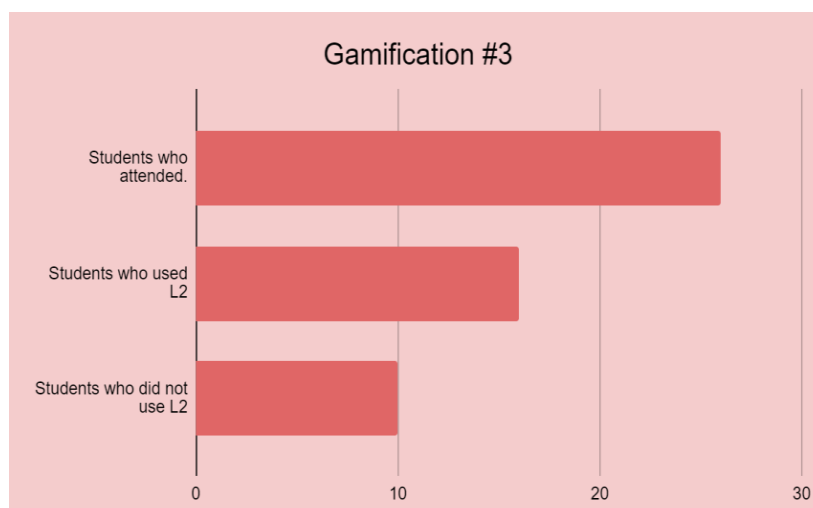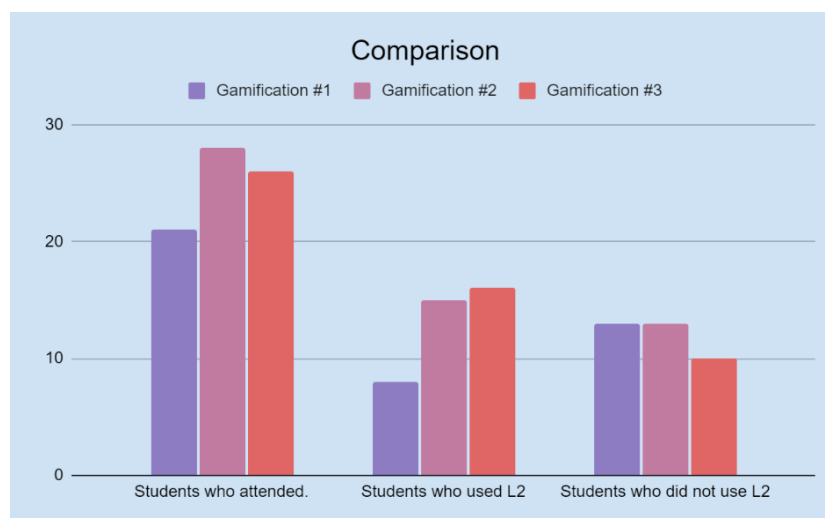*Oral Production in gamification activity #3 (GA-3)*

Figure 4 shows the comparison of the three gamification activities in which there is evidence that the number of students who orally produced increased. To show consistency of this finding with my own perceptions as a researcher, I wrote in my research journal of October 24, "They actually produced sentences on most occasions. Sometimes they had pronunciation or grammar mistakes, but they did not mix English with Spanish". This reflects that the students were using English satisfactorily during the lessons, and it is important to highlight that when they did not know the word, they did not use their mother tongue to complete the sentences. In this respect, through an interview with the cooperating teacher, he was asked whether he had observed any change in the students' oral production thanks to the gamification activities

implemented, and he said that any change in their oral production was positive, and that despite their limitations with pronunciation and vocabulary, he observed a significant improvement in their oral production. Therefore, it can be asserted that thanks to these activities the students had more opportunities to practice the foreign language orally. Moreover, although not all of them participated in all the 3 activities, most of the students actively participated and constructed sentences in at least 1 of the 3 activities.

Figure 4

Comparison of gamification activities

Additional Benefits of Gamification in EFL

The effectiveness of gamification strategies in terms of oral production has already been presented and supported above. Now, it is important to highlight some other benefits that this strategy can bring to the foreign language learning process. The first benefit is competitiveness. In this respect, data analysis showed that these activities generate a competitive environment in the classroom. In the focus group[1], for instance, students were asked how they felt about the classroom environment during gamification activities. Two students expressed that the classroom

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[1] The responses from the focus group and the interview were translated from Spanish to English.

atmosphere was competitive, even tense, but in a positive way, as everyone wanted to earn points, which connected them more to the activity.

The findings mentioned above can be supported by Ahmed et al., (2022) who states that regarding the classroom atmosphere, gamification creates a competitive environment which is very important for students' English language learning. This competitive environment was also observed by the cooperating teacher who was asked about his impression of the use of games for the acquisition of oral skills in English. He said that it was a great strategy as the students did not perceive the activities as tasks, but as games which encouraged their spirit of competition. Moreover, I also perceived this sense of competitiveness on several occasions; for example, in my research journal of October 24, I wrote, *"the times when their participants did not know the answers, one could hear and see the faces of the other students willing to answer for them"*. Taking this into account, it can be asserted that competitiveness can be generated through these games which keep students more attentive to the class as they have a desire to win.

The second important benefit of using this strategy is the confidence that students gain to speak English. In my first research journal, I wrote that regarding the students, the first thing to point out was the embarrassment they felt when speaking in English, and how quietly they spoke when they were competing. This feeling of shame is explained by Galmiche (2018) who says that feeling shame minimizes the individual and makes him feel useless, exposed to the gaze of others and worried about showing a defective self. In the focus group, students were asked about how they felt when they had to speak English during the gamification activities and one of them expressed that she felt a lot of embarrassment and fear of making a mistake. Nevertheless, this factor improved significantly as the students quickly got used to this new dynamic and most of them started to speak loudly and clearly. For example, in my research journal of October 24, I

stated that the students improved noticeably with respect to the first activity, since I did not have to constantly ask them to speak loudly. Furthermore, the cooperating teacher also expressed his opinion about this topic in the interview and he said that "gamification is a great tool because it allows students to lose a little of the fear and panic they feel when speaking in public". Finally, it is important to note that confidence in speaking is not going to appear overnight, but as students become accustomed to these types of activities, they can reduce that embarrassment in speaking as they just want to have fun with the game.

The last important benefit of this section is engagement. In this regard, Redjeki and Muhajir (2021) state that gamification is an innovative and engaging way to learn English because students are motivated to achieve their learning goals. In the focus group the students expressed how they felt in the gamification activities, and they assured that the classes were very engaging as it was a more fun way to learn English. In addition, one of them also said that he liked the point system as it was a motivation to do the class exercises with a purpose.

Moreover, the cooperating teacher was asked how he perceived the students during the gamification activities, and he said that he perceived the students to be more animated and motivated because he felt that they wanted to talk. This assertion is consistent with what Ahmed et al. (2022) express about individuals becoming more engaged and efficient when they play games. I also noticed this aspect in the activities and in a journal entry of October 24, in which I expressed that the activity was almost perfect because most of the students participated and many of them produced sentences in English, or at least tried to do so. These findings provide us with enough evidence to determine that gamification is effective in fostering students' competitiveness, confidence, and engagement in EFL learning.

Effectiveness of L1 as a Tool for Fostering the Target Language Use

Considering that the use of the mother tongue was so frequent among these eighth

graders, I decided to use it as a resource when learning the L2.In this regard, Atkinson (1987, as

cited in Cuartas, 2013) states the use of L1 as a resource is valuable because it helps when

checking comprehension, giving instructions, encouraging cooperation among learners, and

checking for sense. In my research journal I wrote about the importance of using the mother

tongue when it was necessary: "When explaining the instructions, it was very important to rely

on the mother tongue because the instructions could be confusing for them" (October 24). I also

expressed that the students relied on their mother tongue, but when they had to repeat the

sentences, they did it in English, so the use of the mother tongue did not disappear, but it was a

support tool for the use of the foreign language (August 29).

Furthermore, according to Schweers (1999, as cited in Paker & Karaağaç, 2015) the L1

gives learners a sense of security and encourages them to experiment and take risks with English.

This is connected with what was observed in the gamification activities in which students

produced sentences in English but used their native language on some specific moments. For

example: "Voy a repetir, no copie eso" (Student E, first GA), "Cuál es la hoja, la fruta y el

tallo?" (Student M, second GA) and "Cómo se llama la otra?" (Student C, third GA). When

doing this, the students did not use the L1 to complete the sentences in English, but they used it

to ask questions or help each other during the activity, so it was a tool for them to learn the L2.

Finally, some evidence of the usefulness of the L1 to learn the L2 was obtained from the

focus group. Students were asked what they thought of the use of Spanish in an English class and

one of them said that it was helpful because they could understand words in English and learn to

pronounce them. Another student expressed that it was good to have the mother tongue

sometimes because they had to understand what the teacher said and the things they were

pronouncing in English. In addition, they were asked what they thought about an English class

that was conducted entirely in Spanish without using any English. One of them said that it would

be weird, that it would not be an English class; another one said that it would be just a language

class. All this evidence is connected to the results revealed by the empirical study of Cuartas

(2013) in which it was found that the selective use of L1 helps students overcome nervousness

and other difficulties when speaking in English, and increase their confidence when using L2 in

the EFL classroom. For this reason, I can assure that using the L1 in a balanced way to learn the

L2 is a tool that works and gives your students more opportunities to learn.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study sought to recognize the benefits of gamification strategies to

increase the oral production of L2 while using the L1 as a resource. The findings demonstrated

the effectiveness of this strategy to foster the foreign language use without overlooking the

importance of L1. A positive atmosphere of competitiveness as well as some increase in the

students' confidence and engagement with the games were also significant findings of this study.

Games proved to be an effective teaching strategy because they can be adapted to the

students' needs and preferences. For example, this project intended to foster oral production, but

gamification can be adapted to other types of skills depending on the learning objectives. In this

specific case, oral production in English was reflected in the students' active participation in the

activities by means of Spanish as a resource.

Furthermore, the implementation of games generated other benefits for the students. First,

the competitive atmosphere in the classroom, which encouraged their participation and desire to

win. Another benefit was the confidence to use English, which progressively improved, and

allowed the students to overcome affective barriers such as embarrassment. Engagement was also evident since students were more focused and connected with games than with normal activities.

Finally, it should be noted that, despite the positive results, this strategy could have a wider scope of improvement. Unfortunately, the context where it was applied had some particular characteristics that kept us from achieving better results. In different conditions, the positive impact can be higher since the more often gamification activities are applied, the more opportunities for students to improve their confidence, participation, and knowledge.

Reflection

This teaching experience has been important for my professional life, but it has also been very difficult. I only had a few more than 30 students, and I understood what being a teacher entails. It is not just teaching a subject; being a teacher involves values and fundamental things that other professionals could not understand. I have some feelings and sadness because of the violence and lack of opportunities that our young people in Colombia face every day.

I want to highlight the importance of being a committed teacher, and the risk involved in being a teacher without having the fundamental human values to be one. Our population needs teachers who are passionate about what they do, but it is very difficult to find them due to the negative view of this profession in our society. I would like to call for reflection on the role that teachers play on a daily basis, and the lack of tools and support they receive. This process approached me to all the difficulties that our social and educational system has, but it also showed me the importance of what I do. Without a doubt, this profession is worth the effort and the feeling that comes from knowing that your students trust you and grow as people thanks to you is one of the most rewarding feelings I have ever felt in my life.

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Appendix

Example of the Second Gamification Activity

Game # 2 – Who wants to be "plantionaire!?"

Objective: Students will be able to orally produce short, simple sentences about the parts of the plant and the leaf, using demonstrative pronouns appropriately.

Groups: 5 or 6 people.

Dynamic of the game: Students will compete 1 to 1. The game has 3 questions per round, the student who answers 2 of the questions correctly wins points for his/her team. The teacher will be the presenter of the program "Who wants to be plantionaire!". The board will be the "screen" where the students will have the images of the plant and leaf parts. The presenter will ask questions such as: what are these? What are those? What is that? and What is this? while pointing to the part he/she is asking about. Students will be in their seats and will have to press a toy that makes a sound to answer the question using the correct demonstrative pronoun.

Rules
- Each time a student replies in Spanish his or her points will be reduced.
- Students who answer without pressing the "button" will not score points even if the answer is correct.
- Each group will get two additional points per round won.
- Students who refuse to participate will not receive points even if their group wins.
- If students are talking while the participants are competing, a point will be reduced for the whole group.

Pictures for the game: