

GAMIFICATION ELEMENTS IN ENGLISH LESSONS TO ENCOURAGE YOUNG LEARNERS' COMMUNICATION IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

Communication is a part of people's lives. Speaking with each other is one of the most general ways of communication. If in one's native language speaking skills are acquired naturally in the due course of a person's development, in a foreign language speaking has to be learnt in a more purposeful manner. Furthermore, it has to be noted that not always speaking means communication as the latter entails its specific strategies. Therefore, people, who find communication problematic in their native language, may look upon communication in a foreign language as a challenge. It is because besides personality traits and communication strategies, people have to know vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar of a foreign language. The authors of the present study being involved in teaching English as a foreign language and its methodology are of the opinion that when young learners start learning a foreign language, teachers are the ones who help pupils get ready for speaking and communication, doing it in a way that is appealing and motivating for pupils. Taking into account characteristics of primary school pupils and recent trends in education, the aim of the study is to explore how pupils of Grade 3 can be encouraged to speak in English if gamification elements are incorporated in speaking activities. Research method was a case study (a research sample – 16 pupils 9 to 10 years old); data was collected using teacher observation of the lesson routine. The main findings show that gamification elements incorporated in speaking activities encouraged the pupils to speak up in English boosting their self-confidence. A scoreboard, points, badges and reward as gamification elements used in the particular study helped the teacher attract the pupils' attention and they used the chance given by the teacher to communicate in English.

Keywords: *Communication, speaking, teaching and learning English as a foreign language, gamification elements, young learners.*

Introduction

Speaking is a complicated skill to acquire when learning foreign languages. Speaking is knowing and applying vocabulary, its meaning and

pronunciation. It is also about knowing and using word and sentence level grammar. Moreover, it includes communication skills with other people (Council of Europe, 2018). Besides the language competence, speaking is about culture and psychology of a human being. For example, a person may be an introvert who does not prefer speaking or an extrovert who likes being involved in spoken interaction. Consequently, willingness and readiness to speak in a foreign language may appear at different times for different people. Communication being challenging in a person's mother tongue, can be even more problematic in a foreign language.

Teachers as facilitators of pupils' learning are responsible for establishing rapport and creating safe atmosphere for them to use a foreign language in lessons. One way to make primary school English as a foreign language (EFL) lessons friendly and encouraging is playing games. In the 21st century, a variation of playing conventional educational games is gamification as it raises pupils' motivation and interest in the lesson without playing an actual game (Altuntas, 2020; Dreimane, 2019). Furthermore, it turns the whole learning process into a game (How to Succeed in ..., 2018). Consequently, the aim of the present study is to explore how pupils of Grade 3 can be encouraged to speak in English if gamification elements are incorporated in speaking activities.

According to the State Basic Education Standard (2018), at the end of Grade 3 primary school pupils in Latvia have to reach the foreign language level A1 and be ready to continue their work towards the level A2. The Model Basic Education Programme (2018) envisages that 3rd graders should be competent to:

- apply communication strategies to clarify necessary information;
- talk about themselves, the family and friends using simple statements;
- confirm what they have understood;
- express their attitude;
- show agreement and disagreement;
- recognise and apply simple everyday phrases (for greeting, showing gratitude, etc.);
- ask simple questions;
- participate in simple discussions;
- participate in spoken interaction with other pupils.

Being involved in the process of teaching and learning EFL, the authors of the study have observed that in spite of the opinion that primary school learners are good at using English because of having watched cartoons and played computer games in English, they still need to be encouraged to speak up in their English lessons. The possible reason for that is the lack of interactive communication activities; hence, the learners have low speech performance (Reyes, 2018). Moreover, interactive communication activities

should start with real-life communication between the teacher and pupils in a foreign language (Khuziakmetov et al., 2018), for example, asking for and giving explanations, instructions, requests, comments, and assessment. In these everyday activities, learners are involved in listening and speaking in the target language. An opportunity for pupils to communicate in a foreign language in a friendly atmosphere might be regarded as a positive stimulus influencing future learning motivation. This is crucial at the beginning of learning a language (Dewaele, 2011).

However, if the previously mentioned set of ideas is not helpful, teachers should think of additional ways to engage pupils in communication. Nowadays, one of the trends in education is to exercise the gamification concept as it helps to motivate people in different fields using elements of a game (Pfeiffer et al., 2020; Landers et al., 2018; Deterding et al., 2011). Motivation, raised by gamification elements incorporated into EFL lessons, allows pupils to find their interests and continue learning about them (Pfeiffer et al., 2020; Sailer & Homner, 2020) while acquiring English. The main idea of gamification is turning the whole learning process into a game. It includes the following elements into the teaching and learning process: achievement badges and prizes, giving and tracking points, scoreboards and discussion boards, progress bars, levels or quests, flexible goals, pupils making choice; quizzes, problem solving, time limits. Moreover, gamifying a lesson makes learners feel the excitement and rush of a game when in practice they gain knowledge and the learning process does not stop (González-González & Navarro-Adelantado, 2020; Dreimane, 2019; Centre for Teaching Excellence, 2018; Ingwersen, 2017). Overall, gamification is a smooth transition from game-based learning in preschool to creating the learning environment in primary school understandable without unexpected situations for young learners (Cojocariu & Boghian, 2014).

As regards speaking, gamification has a probability to change learners' behaviour, motivation and to prevent their anxiety levels in speaking activities (Rivas, 2017). To make it realistic, teachers have to apply structured gamification as described and divided into five logical steps by Huang and Soman (2013): 1) understanding the target audience and context; 2) defining learning objectives (outcomes); 3) structuring the experience; 4) identifying resources and 5) applying game elements. To perform the case study, the authors followed the mentioned steps the succession of which are described in the next section of the article.

Methodology

The case study was conducted in a spring semester of the school year 2021/2022. In this semester, pupils participated in an online teaching and

learning process, which made it complicated for the authors to complete the study as the initial idea was to have at school. The case study lasted for two months from February to April and was a part of the teaching practice of one of the authors. The research purpose was communicated to the administration of the school and the pupils' parents to receive legal permission to involve pupils in gamified activities in the lessons of English.

Step 1: understanding the target audience and context (Huang & Soman, 2013). The research group was 16 pupils of Grade 3 (9 boys and 7 girls) being eight to nine years old. The particular Grade 3 was chosen to be the research sample as it was previously observed that these pupils had preferred Latvian to communicate in English lessons. Some of the learners enjoyed speaking and participating; however, they rarely spoke English, even simple words and phrases, like 'teacher, ...', 'can I ...', 'yes, ...', 'no, ...'. There was one pupil who actively spoke English in lessons. He had mentioned it before that he had been learning English through social media all the time. Unfortunately, other pupils lacked in confidence.

Step 2: defining learning objectives (outcomes) (Huang & Soman, 2013). By the end of the study, the pupils are expected to use English to communicate with the teacher and each other during the lessons of English. Consequently, the aim of case study was to explore how gamification elements in speaking activities can encourage speaking in English in Grade 3.

Step 3: structuring the experience (Huang & Soman, 2013). The authors of the study analysed the previous teaching and learning process with the particular pupils. Theoretical and methodological literature was analysed to design a plan combining best options to incorporate gamification elements into the lessons of English to encourage pupils to speak in the target language. The gamification elements were incorporated into the speaking activities in five English lessons. There was a lesson per week.

Step 4: identifying resources (Huang & Soman, 2013). The authors of the study identified methodological and technological resources to ensure best online teaching and learning process for helping learners speak in English being involved in gamified activities.

Step 5: applying game elements (Huang & Soman, 2013). One of the authors of the study implemented the theoretically substantiated gamified activities to encourage Grade 3 pupils to speak in English in online lessons. The used gamified activities were as follows:

- A recorded speech (video or audio) – a free speaking activity 'Describe the given picture'. **Gamification elements:** certain time constraints (40 minutes) to make a speech and a certain number of sentences had to be made (10 sentences maximum; using present simple as it had been covered in previous lessons). Pupils could record audio on Whatsapp, vocaroo.com or video on their phones. The tools for recording were

not new to the learners. They had used those before in spring semester of 2020 when Covid-19 pandemic in Latvia started and speaking tasks were given online.

At the beginning and at the end of the case study, three criteria to assess the pupils' work and give feedback were easy to explain to pupils, easy to observe by them and easy to check by the teacher. 1) whether the recording was sent on time (2 points: on time; 1 point: after the due date; 0 points: not sent); 2) the amount of sentences made (0 points: 0 sentences; 1 point: 1–3, 2 points: 4–7, 3 points: 8–10 sentences); 3) fluency of speaking (0 points: many long breaks and a lot of hesitation; 1 point: with short breaks and some hesitation; 2 points: without breaks and hesitation).

- February 4, Who wants to be a millionaire – to revise affirmative and negative sentences in present continuous (learnt at the beginning of the lesson) and recycling vocabulary on fruit and vegetables. This was a whole class activity in which the answers to questions were given to pupils and they all together had to get as many points for the correct answers as possible. **Gamification elements:** scoring points and getting to upper level questions.

For this and two next speaking activities, certain observation criteria were used. As these were online lessons, an option of recording was possible, which was beneficial for the authors to have precise observation of each pupil's speaking pattern.

Table 1. Observation sheet for gamified speaking activities: 'Who wants to be a millionaire'; 'Hide and speak'; 'Open the box'

Pupil	Voluntarily started speaking	Was asked to speak	Spoke in Latvian	Spoke in English	Gave a full sentence	Gave a short answer
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1 pupil x

- February 15, Hide and speak – to revise vocabulary on names of rooms, fruit and vegetables. The task was to notice something unusual in the picture shown, tell what it was and then do the task that was hidden 'under' the fruit or vegetable which was a sentence or a question that asked pupils to use present continuous tense. **Gamification elements:** who is going to be first (leader board) and quest (finding and dealing with confusing questions).
- February 22, Open the box – to revise numbers and present continuous tense before the test. Pupils had to 'open' virtual boxes to get picture prompts for using numbers and present continuous in their answers. This time it was an individual activity. **Gamification elements:** leader board and getting points.

A recorded speech (video or audio) – a free speaking activity ‘Describe a picture of your own choice’. **Gamification elements:** certain time constraints (40 minutes) to make a speech and a certain number of sentences had to be made (10 sentences maximum; using present continuous as it had been covered in previous lessons).

The objective of the first and last free speaking activity was to gain data to compare the pupils’ speaking performance before and after the implementation of the gamified activities. While the three activities with gamification elements were assigned to observe how their use changed the pupils’ speaking in English habits.

The aim to be achieved speaking wise, in each activity complies with previously mentioned learning outcomes pupils are expected to achieve at the end of Grade 3 (Regulations Regarding the State Basic Education..., 2018). The authors of the research describe the results of the case study in the next section of the article.

Results

Figure 1 shows the results of the first and last speaking activity. In the first activity, each pupil could get seven points. The average score for the whole class was 5.38 points. Out of 16 pupils, eight pupils missed the due date. However, they managed to send the completed task to the teacher. Two pupils (Pupil No 2 and No 4) did not manage to send the task at all. On average, the class got 1.25 out of 2 points in this criterion. The amount of sentences varied. 11 out of 16 pupils made 8–10 sentences, three pupils made 4–7 sentences. Altogether, the class got 2.44 out of 3 points average in this criterion. When evaluating fluency, one pupil got two points, the rest of the class who sent the task got two points in this criterion.

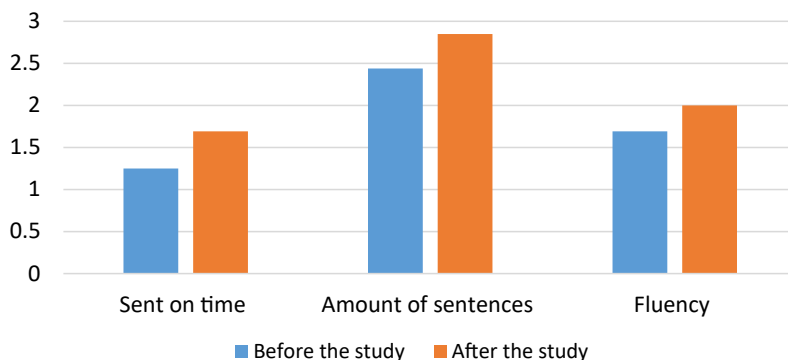


Figure 1. Comparison of the results of the pupils’ speaking performance before and after the case study

The whole class on average got 1.69 out of 2 points for fluency at the beginning of the case study. In contrast, at the end of the case study three out of 16 pupils (Pupil No 2, No 4 and No 14) did not manage to do and send the task. For the rest of the class, 13 pupils, out of eight points possible got 7.54 points. Nine out of 13 pupils managed to send the task on time. While four pupils sent it after the due date. The class got 1.69 out of two points in this criterion. Evaluating the amount of sentences, pupils managed to get 2.85 out of 3 points. Two out of 13 pupils made 4–7 sentences, 11 pupils made 8–10 sentences. Evaluating fluency, all 13 pupils had no big pauses while speaking and they spoke without hesitation.

Table 2 shows how pupils reacted to speaking in English encouragement used in three gamified speaking activities. During the online learning, it was more difficult to supervise pupils and see whether they were learning or not. Therefore, each pupil in each lesson was asked to answer at least one question to make sure they were present and participated. In the activity *Who wants to be a millionaire* (February 4) one student spoke Latvian and it was a comment for another pupil's answer. Overall, pupils enjoyed the activity, participated and helped each other to choose the correct answer. The authors' opinion on why they helped each other is that pupils had to work as a team to win the virtual million dollars and could fantasise about options to spend that money.

Hide and speak activity (February 15) was meant to be carried out in class. However, due to the pandemic it was also online. In this lesson, three pupils spoke Latvian. The reason could be that they had forgotten the names of some fruits and vegetables. Pupil No 4 was not present in the lesson. Pupil No 12 participated very actively, wanted to answer many times to the teacher's questions and help classmates. Pupil No 12 felt encouraged and only spoke English. The pupils were observant and quickly found what was wrong with the pictures. They were motivated to see themselves on the leader board when their question – quest – was completed.

In the activity *Open the box* (February 22), pupils participated actively. Unfortunately, some of them still wanted to speak in Latvian. Pupil No 12 was outstanding again. It was due to the fact that one did not say a word in Latvian, which was done previously. Each pupil had two options to choose one number and open a box where a question or a task were hidden. Pupils No 5 and No 12 chose only numbers from 1 to 10 because of not knowing any other numbers in English. Getting the points and being on the leader board encouraged pupils to speak in English.

To sum up the table information, it is possible to have five different types of pupils – their tendency to speak and do it in English being encouraged by gamification elements. TYPE 1 could be pupils No1; 3 and 13 as they are active in lessons, they give full answers and do it in English.

Table 2. Teacher observation sheet of English lessons on February 4; February 15; February 22

Pupils	Voluntarily started speaking			Was asked to speak			Spoke in Latvian			Spoke in English			Gave a full sentence			Gave a short answer		
	04.02.	15.02.	22.02.	04.02.	15.02.	22.02.	04.02.	15.02.	22.02.	04.02.	15.02.	22.02.	04.02.	15.02.	22.02.	04.02.	15.02.	22.02.
1	✓	✓ ✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
2				✓	✓	✓	✓									✓	✓	✓
3	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
4	✓	-	✓	✓	-	✓		-			-			-		✓	-	✓
5		✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓						✓	✓	✓	✓
6				✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
7				✓	✓	✓									✓	✓	✓	✓
8			✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
9				✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
10				✓	✓	✓							✓	✓	✓			✓
11				✓	✓	✓							✓	✓	✓			✓
12	✓	✓ ✓	✓ ✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓ ✓		✓	✓	✓		✓
13				✓	✓	✓							✓	✓	✓			
14				✓	✓	✓		✓	✓						✓	✓	✓	✓
15				✓	✓	✓									✓	✓	✓	✓
16		✓		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
	4	7	6	16	15	16	1	3	4	7	7	8	7	8	6	9	7	10

TYPE 2: No 2; 4; 6; 7; 14; 15 – pupils who only speak up when asked, they give short answers and do it in Latvian. TYPE 3: pupil No 5: being active, but giving short answers in Latvian. TYPE 4: pupils No 8; 9; 10; 11; 13 – they mainly speak when asked, but they give full answers and do it in English. TYPE 5: pupil No 16 – speaks when asked, gives short answers, but does that in English.

Looking at the progress of Grade 3 pupils' willingness to speak before the case study and after, there were better results after the study in sending the task on time, the amount of sentences and fluency. However, if before the study only two pupils failed to send the task, after the study three pupils did. This data contradicts with the observation of the three gamified lessons. For example, pupil No 4 voluntarily spoke up in English

in lessons repeatedly. Unfortunately, one did not manage to send both free speaking tasks. Hence, the factors for these contradictions should be researched further on. The individual speaking tasks before and after the study provided statistical information about pupils' willingness to speak in English and the teacher observation revealed how encouraged pupils felt to speak in English in their lessons.

Conclusions

Speaking in a foreign language is complicated. Pupils should be encouraged to use English in their lessons when they communicate with the teacher and the classmates. To help learners feel safer, teachers should establish rapport and think of activities which would motivate pupils apply the target language. Nowadays, one of the trends in education is gamification; and pupils like it as it envisages implementing game elements into lessons. Gamification has its certain characteristics, which help it turn the whole learning process into a game. Gamification elements such as points, badges, leader boards, quests, levels and others can serve different purposes inviting pupils to participate in the learning process both individually and in teams. If the learning process is more peaceful, gamification elements used in speaking activities encourage pupils to use English. However, if individual competition is in the centre, encouragement does not work and pupils switch to using the Latvian language. Even though, the short period of the case study depicts a positive trend in changing pupils' habit to use English instead of Latvian in communication in the lessons of English, teachers should be aware of their pupils' personalities to discover what else besides gamification can help their pupils use the target language more often and more confidently.

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