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Gamification to Develop Fifth-Form Students' Self-Directed Learning Skills in English Lessons

*Spēļošana pašvadītu mācīšanās prasmju attīstībai
5. klases skolēniem angļu valodas mācību stundās*

Abstract

The aim of the paper is to explore what gamification elements can help to develop students' self-directed learning skills in English lessons of form 5, because self-directed learning skills are essential for students' further life. Besides, in her previous study the author has discovered that gamification is an effective tool to keep students interested and motivated. The data collection methods in this paper included analysis of literature and regulatory education documents.

Accordingly, it was found that students might lack distinct skills that constitute self-directed learning. Since the learning needs and wants of each student may differ, the teacher must act as a guide to the students, using elements of gamification to motivate the students and provide different activities that would help the students become independent learners. The author concluded that awards, levels, a story narrative, curve of interest and engagement were the most effective gamification elements for improving students' reflection and motivation to learn independently. Furthermore, this leads to a decrease of behavioural issues.

Keywords: gamification, self-directed learning, English lessons, learning strategies, independent language learner.

Introduction

Self-directed learning skills have always been significant in the learning process, but the distance learning during 2020, 2021 and 2022 due to COVID-19 restrictions truly emphasised the significance of students' self-directed learning skills, as students had to learn from home. During

the lessons attended in person, even if students do not pay attention all the time, they still have the teacher and their classmates to motivate them to learn directly or indirectly. However, not all the students are able to remain motivated to study, focus and plan their time at home due to lack of self-directed learning skills.

Self-directed learning is defined as a process where the student is consciously operating and using tools for regulating thinking, emotional processes and behaviour in order to systematically acquire new knowledge and skills [Skola2030 2019a]. Self-directed learning skills would help students to identify their strengths and weaknesses, and plan what they must do to improve. Additionally, the educational standard requires students to develop transversal skills, including self-directed learning skills [Ministru kabinets 2019]. By developing self-directed learning skills, the students will also develop the ability to address and cope with uncertainties and puzzling situations [Skola2030 2019a]. For improved learning at home and development of self-directed learning skills, an individual approach must be taken to help each student [Holberga 2020], because students may have different strengths and weaknesses, – moreover, setting individual goals is a part of gamification. Additionally, the use of different game elements in learning could motivate the students to learn and support them in developing self-directed learning skills.

Accordingly, the author of the paper believes that gamification is topical, because it could be used to help students develop their self-directed learning skills. Gamification is explained as a methodology where different game elements are applied to learning [Attali & Arieli-Attali 2015]. Several studies point to the positive effects of gamification. For example, Parra-Gonzalez et al. [2021] describe how the data collected by survey of 356 students in Spain show that gamification has positive effects on the learning of younger students. The author of this paper would like to further explore the benefits of gamification. If students will enjoy learning and have the skills to do so independently, this will benefit them later in life, and contribute to their ability to participate in life-long learning.

Students in form 5 are 11 years old and are described as “Generation Alpha”, born in the 2010s and having access to advanced technologies [McCrinkle & Fell 2020]. It should also be noted that playing video games

is very popular among people, especially with the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic when people had to spend much more time at home. Playing video games is very popular among children, for example, in the UK in 2019 61% of children of ages 8 to 11 and 67% of children of ages 12 to 15 played video games, but in 2020 and 2021 this percentage increased to 78% for children of ages 8 to 11 and 80% for children of ages 12 to 15 [Clement 2021]. Overall, engaging students in learning is crucial, hence, a teacher must take into consideration the students' interests when designing learning material [Holberga 2021]. Hence, teachers should not ignore the popularity and influence of video games on children and should consider applying game design elements and principles to the learning process to motivate students to learn. The topic of the current paper is not only topical due to the interest of children, but also due to the newly observed circumstances – since the COVID-19 pandemic when learning from home students might get distracted and choose to do something else besides learning on their computer, it became particularly crucial for students to develop self-directed learning skills to enable them to learn independently and be motivated to accomplish this with the help of gamification.

Finally, there are several reasons why the topic of the paper is important. Students should be taught to assume the responsibility for completing their work and participating in the lesson. The proposed aim of students developing self-directed learning skills in form 5 English lessons would benefit the teacher and the students alike, because if the students are given some amount of independence and responsibility, and taught self-directed learning skills they can become adults capable of assuming responsibility for their learning, making decisions and learning independently. Additionally, learning should be fun and interesting. However, it is unrealistic to expect the teacher to be invariably enthusiastic and inspirational every lesson of every day, and every lesson to be fun and interesting. If a teacher suffers from exhaustion or burnout, the teacher may struggle to motivate the students to be independent, make decisions about their learning process and ensure that the lessons are interesting for the students. Therefore, the use of gamification during form 5 English lessons to develop self-directed learning skills would represent advantages for teachers and students equally, because a gamification system

structuring the learning process and material could be helpful in facilitating the teachers' job and making the lessons more engaging for students. Overall, teachers would benefit from recommendations on how to use elements of gamification to help students develop self-directed learning skills in English lessons.

The **aim** of the paper is to explore what gamification elements can help to develop students' self-directed learning skills in English lessons of form 5.

The objective: To analyse literature and documents relating to the chosen age group, self-directed learning skills and use of gamification in English lessons.

Data collection methods: analysis of literature and regulatory education documents.

Self-directed learning skills and gamification

Self-directed learning skills are important because they develop a greater desire and motivation to learn, strengthen knowledge and encourage students to act purposefully and effectively [Skola2030 2019b]. Being purposeful and effective is crucial when it comes to learning. Additionally, developing self-directed learning skills in young learners is essential, as being able to manage one's learning will benefit students not only in school, but also later in life. Notably, self-directed learning skills consist of several small skills such as being able to evaluate and reflect on oneself, and being able to plan [Gündüz & Selvi 2016]. This could perhaps explain why some students may lack self-directed learning skills. If students are able to plan their learning process, but unable to evaluate and reflect on their work, their plans may not be as effective. However, if a student can evaluate his or her own work, accurately and meaningfully reflect upon it, but lack the ability to plan, they may struggle to improve their learning.

Generally, there are several recommendations on developing self-directed learning skills. Several sources emphasise the importance of reflection. For example, Vordermane explains that the learning process must be planned, and after the completion one should analyse and reflect upon

it, as reflection upon one's learning is very important for learning and self-development [Vordermane 2016]. In order to improve the learning process, one must first identify the strengths and weaknesses – this can be accomplished through reflection and analysis. Furthermore, gamification can be used as a tool for making lessons more engaging.

Admittedly, it must be recognised that gamification is not about playing games during lessons. Gamification does not simply mean using a game that is either non-technology or technology based to teach different skills [Tootell et al. 2014]. Overall, gamification can be used to engage students in lessons.

Accordingly, Krath, Schürmann, Korflesch conclude that there are several principles of how gamification works:

- Learning goals must be clear and relevant;
- Students must be able to set their own goals, have individual goals;
- Feedback should be direct and given as quickly as possible;
- Students should be rewarded for their performance and understand the relevance and importance of their achievements;
- Students should be able to see the performance of their peers;
- Students support each other and work towards a common goal;
- Tasks and complexity are adapted to the knowledge and abilities of students;
- Students are guided towards achieving their goals;
- To achieve certain goals, students are able to choose between several different options;
- The employed system should simplify content and be easy to use [Krath et al. 2021].

Furthermore, there are gaming concepts that can be employed during games and, arguably, lessons described by Tootell, Freeman & Freeman. The following different concepts can be employed in a game:

- **Engagement**, such as cooperation, conflict, competition for interpersonal motivation; engagement is usually reflected by students working together to reach certain goals;
- **Investment**, – as a student gains more experience through engagement, they will continue trying to achieve the goals to feel a sense of fulfilment;

- **Fulfilment**, – students should have the opportunities to take risks and the game should be played in a controlled setting;
- **Reward structures**, – the game may also include sub-goals, rewards can be intrinsic and extrinsic;
- **Freedom of reality and concepts**, – the game must represent society, but mundane aspects should be removed to increase engagement;
- **Progression levels**, – to show the students their level of progress;
- **Storytelling** embedded in the game that students take part in;
- **Curve of interest**, – to maintain interest, sub-goals, peaks and troughs must be included; this is important for being able to unlock information continuously;
- **Game state** – students can be given a limited amount of time to complete tasks and assessments;
- **Replay, do-over, infinite play**, – this gives students the freedom to fail without real-world consequences;
- **Time** and **opportunity** are needed for students to practice the learning in realistic ways;
- **Actions** (ways that one can make changes) and **events** (outputs of actions) must motivate students to check in, as well as receive challenges [Tootell et al. 2014].

The gamification elements should help the students regulate and direct their own learning. It is important that the inclusion of gamification elements does not cause conflicts or unhealthy competition between the students. Personal management is important when it comes to self-directed learning skills. Overall, there are certain skills in self-directed learning that overlap with gamification. This is important for the teacher to realise, as the teacher can then focus on these skills that overlap.

Conclusion

Close attention must be paid to the planning, as well as monitoring and evaluating self-directed learning skills. Different English teaching methods should be used, but collaboration and the task-based approach seem to promote problem solving, decision making and self-directed learning should be the most prevalent. Due to children being exposed

to technology and gamification at an early age, gamification should be also used in the classroom. The teacher should be able to use technology and different programmes to facilitate the English and transversal skill learning process. It has been found that self-directed learning consists of different smaller skills. There are different possibilities in which elements of gamification can be used to make lessons more engaging and motivate students to improve their self-directed learning skills. Due to the number of the learning preferences of the students and their possibly contrasting nature, as well as the limited amount of time, the teacher might not be able to assist each student individually. Furthermore, the teacher should use the available resources such as *e-klase*, MOODLE, books, and technology in the classroom to make the lessons more engaging and modern. This will interest and motivate the students. Also, the teacher must pay attention to the time and plan time for students to reflect during the lesson. Depending on the situation at the school and available fund, the teacher should think about rewards for the students. If it is not possible to purchase prizes, the teacher can reward the students with more fun activities, etc. It is important for a teacher to evaluate the learning material. The teacher must act as a guide to the students. Perhaps it is more important how elements of gamification are implemented instead of which elements are implemented. Each situation in each classroom and school is different. Overall, seemingly gaming concepts such as awards, levels, a story narrative, curve of interest and engagement could be the most effective gamification elements for improving students' reflection and motivation to learn independently.

It can be concluded that the elements of gamification can help students develop self-directed learning skills, improve motivation and behaviour in the lesson, but it is of the utmost importance that the teacher is able to combine elements of gamification with other tasks to be accomplished during the lesson, such as formative and summative assessment that must be done according to the regulations of the school. The teacher must provide students with a diverse range of learning opportunities and activities. It is crucial that students have different opportunities and can make choices to personalize their learning process. However, the students must have plenty of chances and time to explore and understand

their learning needs and wants. The teacher must guide the students on their learning journey, but allow the students to uncover the journey by themselves.

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