

GAMIFICATION IN ACTION: PLAYFUL DIDACTIC STRATEGIES TO TRANSFORM ENGLISH TEACHING IN EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS

GAMIFICACIÓN EN ACCIÓN: ESTRATEGIAS DIDÁCTICAS LÚDICAS PARA TRANSFORMAR LA ENSEÑANZA DEL INGLÉS EN CONTEXTOS EDUCATIVOS

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Artículo recibido: 18 de noviembre del 2025

Artículo revisado: 03 de diciembre del 2025

Artículo aprobado: 12 de diciembre del 2025

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Abstract

This scientific article examines the impact of gamification and game-based learning on English teaching in the educational system in Guayaquil, employing a qualitative interpretive approach. Given the low levels of linguistic competence reported in national and international assessments, there is a need to incorporate active methodologies that respond to the interests, learning styles, and sociocultural contexts of today's students. Gamification, understood as the application of game elements in educational settings, and playful learning, as a strategy focused on meaningful experience, allow the classroom to be transformed into a dynamic, collaborative, and motivating space. Through components such as challenges, rewards, narratives, and teamwork, these methodologies promote the development of linguistic, socio-emotional, and digital skills. The study employs qualitative techniques, including participant

observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups, to understand students' perceptions and experiences with these strategies. The expected results include improved motivation, academic performance, and active participation in English language learning. Finally, the benefits, risks, and conditions necessary for the effective implementation of these methodologies are discussed, highlighting the importance of teacher training, contextualized pedagogical design, and actively listening to student voices. It is concluded that gamification can be a transformative tool for a more inclusive, meaningful education that is connected to the challenges of the 21st century.

Keywords: Gamification; Game-based learning; English language teaching; Student motivation; Qualitative methodology.

Resumen

Este artículo científico examina el impacto de la gamificación y el aprendizaje basado en juegos en la enseñanza del inglés en el sistema educativo de Guayaquil, empleando un enfoque interpretativo cualitativo. Dados los bajos niveles de competencia lingüística que se observan en las evaluaciones nacionales e internacionales, es necesario incorporar metodologías activas que respondan a los intereses, estilos de aprendizaje y contextos socioculturales de los estudiantes de hoy en día. La gamificación, entendida como la aplicación de elementos de juego en entornos educativos, y el aprendizaje lúdico, como estrategia centrada en la experiencia significativa, permiten transformar el aula en un espacio dinámico, colaborativo y motivador. A través de componentes como retos, recompensas, narrativas y trabajo en equipo, estas metodologías promueven el desarrollo de habilidades lingüísticas, socioemocionales y digitales. El estudio emplea técnicas cualitativas, como la observación participante, entrevistas semiestructuradas y grupos focales, para comprender las percepciones y experiencias de los estudiantes con estas estrategias. Los resultados esperados incluyen una mayor motivación, un mejor rendimiento académico y una participación activa en el aprendizaje del inglés. Por último, se analizan los beneficios, los riesgos y las condiciones necesarias para la implementación eficaz de estas metodologías, destacando la importancia de la formación del profesorado, el diseño pedagógico contextualizado y la escucha activa de las opiniones de los estudiantes. Se concluye que la gamificación puede ser una herramienta transformadora para una educación más inclusiva y significativa, conectada con los retos del siglo XXI.

Palabras clave: Gamificación; Aprendizaje basado en juegos; Enseñanza del inglés; Motivación de los estudiantes; Metodología cualitativa.

Sumário

Este artigo científico examina o impacto da gamificação e da aprendizagem baseada em jogos no ensino do inglês no sistema educacional de Guayaquil, empregando uma abordagem interpretativa qualitativa. Dados os baixos níveis de competência linguística relatados em avaliações nacionais e internacionais, há uma necessidade de incorporar metodologias ativas que respondam aos interesses, estilos de aprendizagem e contextos socioculturais dos alunos de hoje. A gamificação, entendida como a aplicação de elementos de jogos em ambientes educacionais, e a aprendizagem lúdica, como uma estratégia focada em experiências significativas, permitem que a sala de aula seja transformada em um espaço dinâmico, colaborativo e motivador. Por meio de componentes como desafios, recompensas, narrativas e trabalho em equipe, essas metodologias promovem o desenvolvimento de habilidades linguísticas, socioemocionais e digitais. O estudo emprega técnicas qualitativas, incluindo observação participante, entrevistas semiestructuradas e grupos focais, para compreender as percepções e experiências dos alunos com essas estratégias. Os resultados esperados incluem maior motivação, melhor desempenho acadêmico e participação ativa na aprendizagem da língua inglesa. Por fim, são discutidos os benefícios, riscos e condições necessárias para a implementação eficaz dessas metodologias, destacando a importância da formação de professores, do projeto pedagógico contextualizado e da escuta ativa das vozes dos alunos. Conclui-se que a gamificação pode ser uma ferramenta transformadora para uma educação mais inclusiva e significativa, conectada aos desafios do século XXI.

Palavras-chave: Gamificação; Aprendizagem baseada em jogos; Ensino da língua inglesa; Motivação dos alunos; Metodologia qualitativa.

Introduction

English language teaching in different educational contexts in Guayaquil faces persistent challenges that go beyond curriculum coverage. Despite institutional efforts to improve language proficiency, results remain limited, as evidenced by the low levels of communicative competence reported in national and international assessments. This situation affects not only academic performance but also opportunities for employment and access to higher education, especially in an increasingly globalized world that demands language skills.

In this context, it is urgent to rethink traditional teaching methodologies and explore strategies that respond to the characteristics of today's students. Today's young people are immersed in digital, interactive, and highly visual environments, which require a more dynamic, participatory, and meaningful pedagogy. Gamification and game-based learning are emerging as innovative alternatives that transform the classroom into a space for exploration, collaboration, and active knowledge construction.

By incorporating elements such as challenges, symbolic rewards, immersive narratives, and group dynamics, these methodologies promote intrinsic motivation, engagement, and the development of language skills in real or simulated contexts. In the case of English language teaching, these strategies allow the language to cease being a distant subject and

become a useful, accessible, and stimulating tool, adapted to students' interests and learning styles.

This article, from a qualitative interpretive approach, seeks to explore how gamification and game-based learning can be effectively applied in English language teaching in varied institutions in Guayaquil. Through the analysis of experiences, perceptions, and teaching proposals, it aims to offer a pedagogical alternative that promotes a more inclusive, contextualized, and student-centered education.

Psychopedagogical Foundations of Play-Based Learning

Historically, game-based activities have been recognized as essential tools in education and, above all, have served to foster student progress on cognitive, emotional, and social levels. Including them in the classroom has been fundamental for educators such as Froebel, Decroly, and Montessori, who even indicate that they increase creative autonomy and meaningful learning (Cremin & Chappell, 2021). In their approaches, they state that play is not just a secondary task in the classroom but rather a central axis of the curriculum in the educational process.

From this perspective, for English language teaching, games help students actively participate in the implementation of this new language, overcoming barriers such as the anxiety that often arises when learning a foreign language. Ferreira et al. (2022) remark that playful exercises promote a positive learning environment and spontaneous, interactive, and practical self-discovery among students in accordance with the context of the linguistic structures they experience daily.

According to Hafiza and Pratolo (2024), the best way to learn a language worldwide is through educational games, as they stimulate intrinsic motivation. Therefore, students participate out of interest and curiosity, not out of obligation. This incentive is key to optimizing classroom activities and, at the same time, maintaining long-term motivation for the language. The purpose of these dynamics focuses on helping to address students' diverse learning styles in the educational environment.

In itself, games have become an enriching experience not only in terms of meaning for students but also in the construction of knowledge based on their experiences, emotions, and relationships, as they promote social skills of cooperation and cultural understanding (Zhou & Colomer, 2024). Analyzing these experiences, it is understandable how games transform language instruction into a humanistic, accessible, and effective practice that improves vocabulary, listening comprehension, and speaking more enjoyably.

Gamification as an Educational Strategy

With the advent of technology in the 21st century, language teaching must be linked to gamification. This new methodology involves applying elements related to game design in educational contexts with the goal of increasing student engagement and motivation. It includes strategies and components such as points, levels, badges, challenges, and rewards that transform the teaching-learning process into a more participatory and dynamic experience (Oliveira, et al., 2023). It provides students with progress based on ranks and digital platforms that give them opportunities to practice and develop their skills in a fun and interactive way.

Thanks to gamification, it is possible to transform a traditional class into an interactive challenge for English learning. A clear example is a vocabulary-related exercise that can be transformed into a mission involving varying levels of difficulty, where students earn points for correctly choosing words according to the context in which they will be used. This practice reinforces language use and makes it more fun for the student. Vocabulary classes are facilitated, and students take turns interacting while playing (Oliveira, et al., 2023).

Successful gamification involves another essential component: narrative. By creating stories that include dynamic activities, students better navigate an immersive environment that motivates them to incorporate game principles, along with greater imagination and, consequently, critical thinking (Nadi-Ravandi & Batooli, 2022). Game mechanics are used, along with the integration of elements from the educational environment, to increase their language skills, solve problems effectively, learn English, and make decisions in collaboration with their peers.

This methodology impacts students' perception of learning, self-esteem, and disposition toward the language. This is why the fundamental pillars of gamification proposed by Schell indicate that there must be a story, dynamics, mechanics, and technology, as Cavus et al. (2023) mentioned. Students can thus relate to the content, their peers, and themselves. The rules are defined in the game and implemented during the learning process, thus becoming meaningful.

Player Typology and Learning Personalization

To create interactive microlearning programs on any subject, it is necessary to access available gamification platforms. Another important element is the type of player, according to Richard Bartle's theory (Dreimane, 2021). Through this classification, each student's learning style can be identified. There are killers, achievers, explorers, and socializers. By designing these gamified experiences, each student can be individually motivated, demonstrating progress in each game according to their level, and demonstrating their ability to control and self-control according to the elements, thereby obtaining recognition, which is evident in the real world.

Game-based learning allows for the identification of student types and stimulates the brain to learn English. Certain characteristics can be distinguished among learners: achievers who are motivated by achieving their scores and levels of language proficiency, while socializers enjoy collaborative activities through role-playing and debates. Explorers perform tasks that involve discovering new words or structures, and Killers take their competitiveness to the next level through group challenges. Thanks to these pedagogical advantages, gamification has become a trend in language learning (Gil-Aciron, 2024).

In addition to contributing to the comprehensive development of the four English skills, gamification also fosters an inclusive environment. Individualized learning allows for the assessment of the needs and diversity within the classroom. Each student profile is recognized by the teacher to adopt and adapt gamification strategies that provide meaning and motivation to the teaching-learning process (Hammady & Arnab, 2022). Objectives must be

clear and rules well-defined, seeking voluntary participation and an intrinsic desire on the part of the student to learn and experiment. This fosters the development of personalized language skills and, above all, the participation associated with inclusion and diverse cultural contexts.

By capturing students' attention, they become active participants in their own learning. Analyzing player profiles, in this case, allows us to understand how interests, emotions, and interaction styles influence the learning and development of English language skills (Lee & Baek, 2023). These behavioral patterns guide teachers in developing and designing effective and meaningful strategies. Promoting the acquisition of language skills is essential to increasing learners' motivation and engagement, especially in diverse classrooms.

Escape Rooms and Breakout Edu in English Teaching

In general, escape rooms allow people to work as a team to solve puzzles and complete a mission within a limited time. In the educational setting, participating students must carefully fulfill the pedagogical objective, working as a team to develop language skills. Some of these teaching tools, such as Breakout Edu, allow for an immersive experience in which clues are provided if necessary and a fluid experience is ensured for assessment or review. As Martín-Caraballo et al. (2024) indicate, this theme proposes an environment with a specific story and a mission tailored to the game. Thus, this methodology promotes critical judgment and participation, and tests logic, teamwork, and communicative skills.

More than just a game, in the English classroom, escape rooms become a gamification tool that engages students in the learning process. This method motivates and helps students develop language skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, including English clues, linguistic codes, audios, texts, and grammar challenges. These activities can be presented in a variety of adaptable and versatile digital formats and provide contextualized, playful learning so that an interdisciplinary approach exists at different educational levels (Homayouni & Mehrabi, 2025).

In this context, it is important to note that educational experiences with escape rooms address integrated topics and connect knowledge to break the notion of isolated teaching. In an interactive environment, scientific, historical, and cultural elements are incorporated through the resolution of local and global problems, strengthening skills for comprehensive lifelong learning (Makri & Martina, 2021). A solid understanding of the principles of cooperative learning is ensured, as this enriching experience connects language learning with skills that must be acquired for the real world. This will enable students to take on roles appropriate to the opportunities that arise at any given time.

By creating social behaviors, bonds are formed in an interactive environment. From this perspective, this escape room strategy offers an advantage for observing how students, using an innovative teaching method, face challenges and communicate, negotiate, and regulate their emotions. Taraldsen et al. (2022) indicate that students are more likely to retain information in a practical way through active learning. Mutual benefits are sought, such as helping peers or

supporting people at risk. Gamification training has gained significant importance in recent years, transforming it from mere entertainment into a teaching and learning method.

21st-Century Skills and Gamification

In general teaching and in specific areas such as teaching English as a foreign language, students face challenges in acquiring learning and topics that are rigorous in terms of adaptability to the educational context. Therefore, Faure-Carvalho et al. (2022) remark that gamification improves academic performance and helps develop key skills such as resilience and creativity that enable greater problem-solving and digital literacy. These skills are essential in the technological and highly globalized world, as they are resources that contribute to social and inclusive relevance in the formal educational context.

In conjunction with job demands, the development of social skills such as initiative, respect, and cooperation is promoted in order to enhance student motivation through educational games. Learning English through this strategy assists in confronting the real world, facilitating decision-making, teamwork, and using the language as a communication tool to solve problems. Adaptability and critical judgment are strengthened, becoming a central factor for cooperative learning in a safe classroom environment, in terms of the sustainable approach of guaranteed engagement and scaffolding (Katual & Goede, 2023).

Focusing on strengthening the teaching of English as a foreign language in diverse contexts and environments, it is complementary to analyze the use of digital platforms. Worth mentioning are Duolingo, ClassDojo, and

Quizizz, which are important for enriching students' learning processes in conjunction with ICTs. These digital systems offer interactive resources, immediate feedback, and individualized monitoring that enhance independent learning and self-regulation. They can be implemented in the classroom as part of core curriculum activities, generating a desire to study and having fun at the same time, exploring topics of interest to students. While Triantafyllou et al. (2025) specify the main advantages, they are complemented by teaching skills to promote learning and safety when participating in classes.

Thanks to interactive and gamification tools and digital platforms, pedagogical integration and teacher support can be observed. Among the benefits are accessibility, the improvement of specific skills necessary for developing 21st-century competencies, and personalized learning. Through students' experiences with gamified media, we analyze an increase in student motivation and performance in an increasingly technological society. Their personal narratives, testimonies, and observations within each level create a unique experience and simultaneously identify changes in learner motivation, attitude, and perception. However, teacher support is required, as the pedagogical integration of these platforms seeks to maximize educational potential.

Risks and Limitations of Gamification

Due to the digital divide, especially in public education sectors, although gamification offers multiple advantages, it also poses risks if not properly designed and without the appropriate financial and educational resources. On the socioeconomic side, it is important to note that these digital platforms are used to a lesser

extent. English teaching is often shrouded in a traditional method, as e-learning achieves a minimal level of connection between time and space between individuals and their respective institutions (de Souza & Manera, 2024).

Authors mentioned in different studies, such as Mirzaie Feiz Abadi et al. (2022), claim that some of the disadvantages include problems of excessive competitiveness, generating an environment of stress, tension, and demotivation if not managed with appropriate pedagogical sensitivity. Another risk includes the dependence on extrinsic rewards. Obtaining prizes generates anxiety and diverts attention from learning. If rewards are obtained without much effort and are not well designed according to the educational purpose, they lose their motivational value and can cause frustration in the learner.

Gamification is not just a trend. Adapting these digital resources to pedagogy seeks profound teacher reflection. Pedagogical support is essential for creating safe and secure learning environments. Therefore, Wulantari et al. (2023) notice the lack of ongoing instruction from teachers and proper adaptation to the context can turn this strategy into an ineffective experience, one that serves only as a superficial entertainment.

There are countless strategies and methods for learning a new language, and even more so for mastering it. It will be the students who apply these immersive resources as part of their educational experience to make it productive and rewarding. Regarding skill mastery, it is essential to analyze and evaluate students' perceptions of game-based learning. Gamification also identifies emotions, expectations, and reactions. All of this allows

for adaptation of the methodology and curriculum to identify and strengthen students' individual educational needs, avoiding common mistakes and ensuring English learning for all, which must be transformative and truly meaningful (Hao, Winn, & Qiang, 2024).

Methods

This study adopts an interpretive qualitative approach aimed at understanding the experiences, perceptions, and meanings that students attribute to the use of gamified strategies in English language learning. The choice of this approach responds to the need to explore in depth the subjective processes involved in motivation, participation, and knowledge acquisition in real educational contexts.

The research is conducted in varied institutions in Guayaquil, selected based on accessibility and institutional diversity. Although it is not limited to vulnerable contexts, the aim is to represent a heterogeneous sample of students with different levels of linguistic competence and learning styles. The sample will be intentional, consisting of students between the ages of 15 and 18 who are taking English courses and have participated in gamified or playful activities.

Data collection uses techniques such as participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups. Observation will focus on the development of gamified activities in the classroom, recording behaviors, interactions, and levels of participation. Interviews will explore individual perceptions of the impact of these methodologies on language learning. Focus groups will facilitate the collective construction of meaning and the

identification of common patterns among students.

Data analysis is performed using open coding and thematic categorization, following the principles of grounded theory. The aim will be to identify emerging categories related to motivation, engagement, perception of learning, and language skill development. Triangulation of sources and techniques will ensure the internal validity of the study, while a detailed description of the context and participants will contribute to the transferability of findings to other similar educational settings.

Results

With the implementation of gamified strategies in English language teaching, a significant increase in students' intrinsic motivation is expected. Playful dynamics, incorporating elements such as challenges, symbolic rewards, and immersive narratives, can transform the perception of language learning, making it more attractive, accessible, and relevant to young people. This change in attitude towards English could be reflected in a greater willingness to participate actively in class and take communicative risks.

Likewise, an improvement in linguistic performance is expected, especially in listening comprehension and writing skills. By encouraging contextualized language practice, gamified activities allow students to use English in real or simulated situations, which promotes vocabulary retention, fluency, and grammatical accuracy. Constant interaction with the language in a non-judgmental environment facilitates the development of communication skills naturally and progressively.

Another expected outcome is the strengthening of social-emotional skills such as collaboration, self-regulation, empathy, and resilience. By working in teams, solving puzzles, or overcoming challenges, students learn to communicate, negotiate, make decisions, and manage their emotions. These skills, essential in the 21st century, are developed across the board and complement language learning, preparing students for more demanding academic and work contexts.

Finally, a transformation in the pedagogical relationship between teachers and students is anticipated. Gamification promotes a more active role for students and a more facilitative stance for teachers, which can create a more horizontal, participatory, and affective classroom environment. From a qualitative perspective, it is hoped that students' voices will reveal a more meaningful learning experience, where English ceases to be a distant subject and becomes a useful, accessible, and stimulating tool.

As part of the approach proposed in this study, a gamified teaching unit was designed to develop English communication skills in students at technical high schools in Guayaquil. This proposal seeks to illustrate how the principles of gamification and game-based learning can be applied in a concrete way in the classroom, promoting motivation, active participation, and meaningful learning.

The unit, entitled “Mission English: Unlock the Code,” is structured in four 45-minute sessions and focuses on the use of vocabulary and structures for giving directions and describing places. Through activities such as interactive maps, escape rooms, city design, and digital trivia, students develop language skills in a

playful and collaborative environment (see table 1 and 2) .

Table 1. Gamified Teaching Unit Sheet “Mission English: Unlock the Code”

ELEMENT	DESCRIPTION
Level	A2 – Pre-intermediate
Duration	4 sessions of 45 minutes
Target group	Students aged 15 to 18 at institutions in Guayaquil
Topic	Vocabulary and structures for giving directions and describing places
General objective	To develop communicative competence in English through gamified learning activities
Methodology	Game-based learning and gamification
Resources	Maps, cards, a stopwatch, mobile devices, digital platforms (Kahoot, Quizizz)
Assessment	Performance rubrics, observation, self-assessment, and written production

Source: Own elaboration

Table 2. Gamified Activities

SESSION	TITLE	DESCRIPTION	GAMIFIED ELEMENTS	SKILLS
1	The Map Challenge	Orientation game using maps and English instructions	Points, badges, levels	Listening, vocabulary, teamwork
2	Escape the Classroom	Mini escape room with linguistic clues	Time limit, unlockable hints, and roles	Reading, problem-solving, and collaboration
3	Create Your City	Group design of a city using “There is/are” and spatial expressions	Jury presentation, creativity points	Writing, speaking, creativity
4	Mission Review	Digital trivia game to review vocabulary and grammar structures	Ranking, bonus rounds, badges	Grammar review, vocabulary recall

Source: Own elaboration

Discussion

The findings in this research suggest that gamification and game-based learning can represent a significant transformation in English language teaching in Guayaquil’s institutions.

From a qualitative perspective, it is recognized that learning does not only occur based on content, but also through the experiences, emotions, and relationships that students build in the classroom. In this sense, playful methodologies allow the educational process to be redefined, making it more human, participatory, and contextualized (Katual & Goede, 2023).

One of the most relevant aspects is the positive impact on student motivation. Gamification, by incorporating elements such as rewards, levels, and challenges, creates a dynamic learning environment that stimulates curiosity and engagement (Oliveira, et al., 2023).

However, it is important to note that this effect depends largely on the pedagogical design and the teacher's ability to adapt strategies to the characteristics of the group. Extrinsic motivation, if not managed properly, can become a mechanical expectation that undermines the educational purpose.

Gamification also promotes the development of language skills in an integrated manner. Fun

activities allow students to practice the language in real or simulated contexts, which improves fluency, comprehension, and oral and written production. However, careful planning is required to ensure that the linguistic content is aligned with the curriculum objectives and that the dynamics are not limited to the mechanical repetition of vocabulary or grammatical structures (de Souza & Manera, 2024).

Finally, the discussion must consider the challenges involved in implementing these methodologies. Lack of teacher training, resistance to change, and scarcity of technological resources can limit the scope of gamification in the classroom. In addition, it is necessary to avoid stimulus overload and excessive competitiveness, which can lead to anxiety or exclusion. Therefore, we propose critical, reflective, and situated gamification that recognizes students' voices and promotes a more equitable, meaningful, and transformative education.

Conclusions

The incorporation of active methodologies such as gamification and game-based learning represents a valuable opportunity to transform English language teaching in varied institutions in Guayaquil. These strategies allow students to take center stage in their learning process, promoting motivation, participation, and the development of language skills in a dynamic and meaningful environment.

From the qualitative approach adopted in this study, it is evident that English language learning depends not only on the content taught but also on the experiences of students in the classroom. Playful dynamics, by integrating narrative, collaborative, and technological

elements, create an educational space that is more closely aligned with the interests and learning styles of today's students.

However, for these methodologies to be effective, teachers must have adequate training, relevant resources, and coherent pedagogical planning. Gamification should not be applied as a passing trend, but as a thoughtful strategy that responds to the real needs of the educational context and promotes inclusive and transformative teaching.

In summary, this article proposes that the use of gamified strategies in English language teaching can significantly contribute to improving academic performance, strengthening social-emotional skills, and preparing students for the challenges of the 21st century. The voice of the students, gathered through qualitative techniques, will be key to validating these proposals and guiding future pedagogical practices in the field of technical education in Guayaquil.

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