

BEYOND MOTIVATION: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF GAMIFICATION BENEFITS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract. Gamification has gained increasing attention in English language learning (ELL) due to its potential to create engaging and interactive learning experiences. While previous studies have predominantly highlighted its role in enhancing learner motivation, emerging literature suggests that the benefits of gamification extend beyond motivational outcomes. Employing a narrative literature review approach, this paper critically examines and synthesises existing research on the broader educational benefits of gamification in ELL. Drawing on recent scholarly literature, the review explores the affective, cognitive, and social dimensions of gamified learning environments. The review reveals that gamification contributes to increased learner confidence, reduced language anxiety, improved vocabulary acquisition and language proficiency, enhanced knowledge retention, as well as greater opportunities for collaboration and communication among learners. However, the review also highlights several limitations and challenges, including the overreliance on extrinsic rewards, inconsistent implementation practices, and contextual factors that may influence effectiveness. The paper argues that the value of gamification lies not only in motivating learners but also in supporting meaningful language development and learner engagement. The review concludes by identifying significant gaps in current scholarship and proposing directions for future research and pedagogical practice in English language education.

Keywords: *gamification, English language learning, learner engagement, language development*

Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has significantly transformed educational practices across various disciplines, including language education. In recent years, educators have increasingly sought innovative approaches to enhance learner engagement and improve learning outcomes in response to the evolving needs of twenty-first-century learners. Traditional teacher-centred instructional methods have often been criticised for their limited ability to sustain students' interest and active participation, particularly in language learning environments where continuous practice and interaction are essential (Fuentes and Expósito, 2024). In response, technology-enhanced pedagogies have become increasingly prominent as educators seek more dynamic and learner-centred approaches to learning (Siregar and Degeng, 2025). According to Ismar and Rahma (2025), among these emerging approaches, gamification has attracted considerable attention due to its ability to incorporate game-design elements into non-game contexts. By integrating features such as points, badges, leaderboards, rewards, and challenges, gamification aims to increase learner involvement and foster a more engaging learning environment (Wafa and

Kusumaningtyas, 2026). As a result, it has become a widely adopted strategy in educational settings seeking to improve students' learning experiences and academic performance.

Shahidan and Kamarol Ariffin (2024) state that the growing interest in gamification has been particularly evident in English language learning (ELL), where learners often encounter challenges related to motivation, participation, confidence, and language anxiety. Language acquisition requires sustained effort, repeated practice, and meaningful interaction, making learner engagement a critical factor in achieving successful outcomes (Arip and Hashim, 2024). In response to these challenges, educators have increasingly incorporated gamified activities into language classrooms to create more interactive and enjoyable learning experiences. According to Nilubol and Sitthitikul (2023), numerous digital platforms and applications have integrated gamification elements to support vocabulary learning, reading comprehension, listening practice, speaking activities, and writing development. Much of the existing literature has focused on the positive influence of gamification on learner motivation (Fatah, 2025). As a result, gamification is often viewed primarily as a tool for encouraging participation and sustaining learner interest.

Despite the considerable attention given to motivation, reducing the value of gamification to motivational outcomes alone risks overlooking its broader educational contributions. Recent studies indicate that gamified learning environments may contribute to broader educational outcomes, including enhanced language proficiency, improved knowledge retention, increased learner autonomy, reduced language anxiety, and stronger collaborative skills (Toraja, 2026; Nik Fauzi et al., 2025). Furthermore, gamification has been associated with the development of positive learning attitudes and greater confidence in using the target language (Chan and Lo, 2024). However, findings across studies remain diverse, with some researchers reporting varying levels of effectiveness depending on contextual factors such as learner characteristics, instructional design, technological accessibility, and the specific gamification elements employed (Al-Khresheh, 2025; Gini et al., 2025). Taken together, these findings suggest that the role of gamification in English language learning is more complex than is often assumed. While numerous reviews have examined its impact on motivation and engagement, there remains a need for a more comprehensive synthesis that critically evaluates the wider educational benefits associated with gamified learning experiences (Hamuddin et al., 2024). This raises an important question regarding whether the effectiveness of gamification should be evaluated solely through its ability to motivate learners or through its broader contribution to language development.

In light of these considerations, this paper presents a critical review of the literature on the benefits of gamification in English language learning. Rather than focusing solely on motivational outcomes, the review examines the affective, cognitive, and social dimensions of gamification that contribute to language development and meaningful learning experiences. Specifically, the paper explores how gamification influences learner confidence and anxiety, supports language acquisition and retention, and facilitates collaboration and communication among learners. By critically synthesising findings from existing studies, this review seeks to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how gamification supports language learning beyond motivational gains. The paper also identifies limitations and gaps within the current literature and discusses implications for future research and pedagogical practice. Through this critical examination, the review seeks to contribute to the growing

discourse on technology-enhanced language learning and highlight the potential of gamification as a multidimensional educational strategy that extends beyond motivation alone.

Materials and Methods

This paper adopted a narrative critical review approach to examine the broader educational benefits of gamification in English language learning (ELL). A narrative review was considered appropriate because it enables the critical synthesis and interpretation of existing scholarship drawn from diverse educational contexts, research designs, and learner populations. Unlike systematic reviews that emphasise exhaustive search procedures and strict inclusion protocols, narrative critical reviews allow researchers to explore conceptual developments, recurring patterns, and emerging debates within a body of literature. Relevant literature was identified through searches conducted in major academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar. The search process employed combinations of keywords such as gamification, English language learning, English language teaching, language acquisition, learner engagement, language development, language proficiency, and gamified learning. To ensure contemporary relevance, priority was given to peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2020 and 2026. Additional sources were identified through reference chaining, whereby references cited in key publications were examined for potential inclusion.

The review included studies that specifically investigated the application of gamification within English language learning or English language teaching contexts. Research examining affective outcomes (e.g., motivation, confidence, and anxiety), cognitive outcomes (e.g., vocabulary acquisition, language proficiency, and retention), and social outcomes (e.g., collaboration and communication) was considered relevant to the objectives of this review. Studies focusing exclusively on game-based learning, serious games, or educational games without explicit gamification elements were excluded to maintain conceptual consistency. Following the screening process, a total of 24 peer-reviewed articles were selected for detailed review and analysis. The selected studies represented a range of educational contexts and research designs, including literature reviews, survey studies, experimental research, and mixed-method investigations. The articles were read and critically examined to identify common findings, recurring trends, areas of agreement, and points of divergence regarding the educational benefits of gamification in ELL. To facilitate synthesis and discussion, findings from the reviewed studies were organised into three broad dimensions frequently reported in the literature: affective benefits, cognitive benefits, and social benefits. Challenges, contradictions, and contextual limitations associated with gamification were also identified and critically discussed. Through this process, the review sought not only to synthesise existing evidence but also to evaluate the broader educational significance of gamification beyond its commonly reported motivational effects.

Results and Discussion

Conceptualising gamification in English language learning

According to Wulantari et al. (2023), gamification has emerged as a prominent educational approach that incorporates game-design elements into non-game contexts to enhance user engagement and participation. Unlike traditional educational methods, gamification seeks to create enjoyable and interactive learning experiences through the integration of features such as points, badges, leaderboards, rewards, levels, and challenges (Vathanalaoha, 2022). Samson and Karthiga (2020) state that the concept has attracted considerable scholarly attention because it offers a means of fostering active learning while sustaining learner engagement over time. In language education, gamification is increasingly recognised as an innovative strategy that aligns with the preferences and learning habits of digital-native students (Laura-De La Cruz et al., 2023). By embedding game-like mechanics into instructional activities, educators can create environments that encourage learners to participate more actively while simultaneously pursuing educational objectives (Al-Sabbagh, 2023). For this reason, gamification has been increasingly adopted across educational contexts, including English language learning.

Although the terms gamification and game-based learning are often used interchangeably, they represent distinct educational approaches (Amalia and Amelia, 2025). According to Abud Rolim and Teixeira (2025), game-based learning involves the use of actual games specifically designed for educational purposes, where learning occurs through gameplay itself. In contrast, gamification does not necessarily require learners to play a complete game (Nhan, 2024). Instead, it incorporates selected game elements into existing learning activities to increase engagement and motivation. For example, an English language teacher may award points for successful vocabulary exercises, provide digital badges for completing writing tasks, or introduce leaderboards to encourage participation in classroom discussions (Rachman et al., 2024). In such cases, the learning activities remain fundamentally educational, while game mechanics are employed to enhance learners' experiences. This distinction is important because many of the educational benefits attributed to gamification stem from the strategic use of game elements rather than from gameplay itself.

The application of gamification in English language learning has expanded significantly with the growing availability of digital learning platforms and educational technologies. Many language learning applications incorporate gamified features to support the development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills (Kumar and Hashim, 2024). Through structured challenges, immediate feedback, progress tracking, and achievement systems, learners are encouraged to engage more consistently with language-learning activities (Toraja, 2026). Beyond increasing participation, gamification also supports learner-centred learning by enabling learners to engage with activities at their own pace (Ismar and Rahma, 2025). Chan and Lo (2024) state that the incorporation of rewards and progress indicators may also contribute to a sense of accomplishment, encouraging learners to persist in language-learning tasks that might otherwise be perceived as difficult or repetitive. These features have made gamification an attractive strategy for addressing common challenges in English language learning.

The educational value of gamification can be partially explained through Self-Determination Theory, which emphasises the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in fostering learner engagement (Gini et al., 2025). Gamified learning environments often provide learners with opportunities to make choices, monitor their progress, and receive recognition for their achievements, thereby supporting their sense of autonomy and competence (Vathanalaoha, 2022). Additionally, collaborative

gamified activities may strengthen social interaction and create a sense of relatedness among learners (Wafa and Kusumaningtyas, 2026). These motivational mechanisms help explain why gamification has attracted substantial interest among language educators and researchers. However, contemporary literature increasingly suggests that the benefits of gamification extend beyond motivation alone. In addition to enhancing learners' willingness to participate, gamification may contribute to cognitive outcomes such as language acquisition and retention, as well as social outcomes related to communication and collaboration. Therefore, a comprehensive examination of these broader benefits is necessary to understand the full educational potential of gamification in English language learning. More importantly, such an examination may help shift the discussion from whether gamification motivates learners to how it contributes to meaningful language development.

Multidimensional benefits of gamification in English language learning

The growing body of literature on gamification in English language learning suggests that its educational value extends beyond the enhancement of learner motivation. While motivation remains the most frequently discussed outcome, focusing exclusively on motivation risks overlooking other educational benefits that are equally important for language development. These benefits can be broadly categorised into three interconnected dimensions: affective, cognitive, and social (Fatah, 2025; Arip and Hashim, 2024; Rachman et al., 2024). The affective dimension focuses on learners' emotions, attitudes, confidence, and anxiety, while the cognitive dimension relates to language acquisition, retention, and academic performance. The social dimension encompasses collaboration, communication, and peer interaction within learning environments. Viewing gamification through these dimensions provides a more comprehensive understanding of its educational value and reinforces its role as a multifaceted pedagogical approach rather than merely a motivational tool (*Table 1*).

Table 1. A synthesis of gamification benefits in English language learning.

Dimension	Benefits Identified in the Literature	Implications for English Language Learning	Supporting Studies
Affective	Motivation, confidence, reduced anxiety, positive attitudes	Encourages active participation and willingness to communicate	Chan and Lo (2024); Wulantari et al. (2023)
Cognitive	Vocabulary acquisition, language proficiency, retention, sustained attention	Supports language development and learning performance interaction, sense of belonging	Hamuddin et al. (2024); Kumar and Hashim (2024)
Social	Collaboration, communication, peer interaction, sense of belonging	Facilitates meaningful language use and social learning	Wafa and Kusumaningtyas (2026); Nhan (2024)

Affective benefits

Among the various benefits associated with gamification, affective outcomes have received the greatest scholarly attention in English language learning. Affective factors, including motivation, attitudes, confidence, and anxiety, play a crucial role in shaping learners' willingness to engage with language-learning activities (Samson and Karthiga, 2020). Since language acquisition often requires sustained effort and frequent interaction, learners' emotional experiences can significantly influence both participation and achievement (Siregar and Degeng, 2025). Consequently, researchers have increasingly examined the capacity of gamification to create positive learning environments that support learners' emotional and psychological development. Among

the affective benefits identified in the literature, enhanced learner motivation remains the most consistently reported outcome. Gamified learning environments utilise game elements such as points, badges, rewards, and leaderboards to create clear objectives and provide immediate feedback on performance (Fuentes and Expósito, 2024). These mechanisms encourage learners to participate actively in learning activities and sustain their engagement over time. Furthermore, the achievement-oriented nature of gamification may foster a sense of accomplishment, motivating learners to complete tasks and pursue higher levels of performance (Al-Khresheh, 2025). Such experiences can transform routine language-learning activities into more enjoyable and meaningful experiences, thereby increasing learners' commitment to the learning process.

In addition to motivation, gamification has been associated with increased learner confidence and self-efficacy (Fatah, 2025). Language learners frequently encounter challenges related to fear of making mistakes, particularly when communicating in a second or foreign language (Toraja, 2026). Gamified activities often provide opportunities for repeated practice within supportive and low-risk environments, allowing learners to develop confidence gradually. According to Wulantari et al. (2023), through continuous feedback and recognition of progress, learners become more aware of their achievements and capabilities. This heightened sense of competence may encourage greater participation in classroom discussions, language exercises, and communicative tasks, ultimately supporting more active engagement with the target language.

Another notable affective benefit concerns the reduction of language anxiety. Anxiety has long been recognised as a barrier to effective language learning, particularly in activities involving speaking and performance (Gini et al., 2025). The interactive and enjoyable nature of gamified learning environments may help reduce learners' apprehension by shifting attention away from potential failure and towards participation and achievement (Hamuddin et al., 2024). Moreover, the incorporation of challenges and rewards can encourage learners to view mistakes as opportunities for improvement rather than indicators of inadequacy (Abud Rolim and Teixeira, 2025). Collectively, these findings suggest that gamification contributes to a more positive emotional learning experience by fostering motivation, confidence, and reduced anxiety, thereby creating conditions that are conducive to successful English language learning.

Cognitive benefits

Beyond its influence on learners' emotions and attitudes, gamification has also demonstrated considerable potential in supporting cognitive development within English language learning contexts. Cognitive benefits refer to improvements in processes related to learning, understanding, memory, and language acquisition (Fatah, 2025). According to Ismar and Rahma (2025), as language learning requires learners to retain information, apply knowledge, and develop communicative competence, researchers have increasingly explored the extent to which gamified learning environments contribute to these outcomes. Evidence from recent studies suggests that gamification can support more effective learning experiences by encouraging active engagement with instructional content and providing opportunities for continuous practice. One of the most frequently reported cognitive benefits of gamification is enhanced vocabulary acquisition (Rachman et al., 2024). Vocabulary knowledge forms the foundation of language proficiency, and learners often struggle to retain newly learned words through traditional instructional approaches (Nik Fauzi et al., 2025).

Gamified activities address this challenge by incorporating repetition, immediate feedback, and interactive tasks that reinforce vocabulary learning (Kumar and Hashim, 2024). Hamuddin et al. (2024) state that through quizzes, challenges, and reward systems, learners are encouraged to engage repeatedly with lexical items, increasing the likelihood of long-term retention. As a result, gamification may support more effective vocabulary development while simultaneously maintaining learner interest and participation.

In addition to vocabulary acquisition, gamification has been linked to improvements in overall language proficiency and academic achievement (Nilubol and Sitthitikul, 2023). The structured nature of gamified learning activities encourages learners to progress through increasingly challenging tasks, promoting deeper engagement with language content (Al-Khresheh, 2025). Samson and Karthiga (2020) state that immediate feedback mechanisms enable learners to identify and correct errors promptly, facilitating more effective learning. Furthermore, the combination of clear goals and measurable progress may encourage learners to invest greater effort in language-learning activities, thereby contributing to improved performance across various language skills, including reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Shahidan and Kamarol Ariffin, 2024). Another important cognitive outcome concerns knowledge retention and sustained attention. The interactive nature of gamified learning environments can help learners maintain focus and remain engaged with instructional materials for longer periods (Gini et al., 2025). Repeated exposure to language content through game-like activities strengthens memory processes and enhances information retention (Amalia and Amelia, 2025). Moreover, the use of challenges and progression systems encourages learners to revisit previously learned content, reinforcing understanding and reducing forgetting (Al-Sabbagh, 2023). These findings indicate that gamification supports cognitive development not only by facilitating language acquisition but also by promoting deeper processing, retention, and application of knowledge in English language learning contexts.

Social benefits

In addition to affective and cognitive outcomes, gamification has been found to generate significant social benefits that contribute to meaningful language learning experiences. According to Nhan (2024), language learning is inherently social in nature, as the development of communicative competence requires interaction with others. Consequently, collaborative learning opportunities and meaningful communication play a vital role in facilitating language acquisition (Chan and Lo, 2024). Gamified learning environments often incorporate social elements that encourage learners to engage with peers, exchange ideas, and participate in collective learning activities, thereby strengthening the social dimension of language education. One of the primary social benefits associated with gamification is enhanced collaboration among learners. Many gamified activities involve group-based challenges, team competitions, and cooperative tasks that require learners to work together towards shared objectives (Wafa and Kusumaningtyas, 2026). Such activities encourage learners to support one another, share knowledge, and develop problem-solving strategies collectively. Through collaborative participation, learners gain opportunities to practise language skills in authentic communicative situations while simultaneously developing interpersonal competencies that are valuable both inside and outside the classroom.

Gamification also promotes communication and interaction among learners (Rachman et al., 2024). The inclusion of interactive tasks, discussion-based activities, and collaborative challenges encourages learners to use the target language more frequently and purposefully (Fatah, 2025). Siregar and Degeng (2025) state that increased interaction provides learners with opportunities to negotiate meaning, clarify misunderstandings, and receive feedback from peers. These communicative exchanges contribute not only to language development but also to greater learner engagement and participation. Furthermore, the social nature of gamified learning may help create more inclusive classroom environments where learners feel comfortable expressing ideas and contributing to learning activities (Wulantari et al., 2023). Another important social benefit is the development of a sense of belonging and community among learners. Gamified environments often create shared experiences through collective goals, achievements, and challenges (Amalia and Amelia, 2025). Such experiences can strengthen social bonds and foster positive relationships among learners. When learners perceive themselves as valued members of a learning community, they are more likely to participate actively and remain engaged in educational activities (Arip and Hashim, 2024). Therefore, the social benefits of gamification extend beyond collaboration and communication, contributing to the creation of supportive learning environments that facilitate both language development and positive social interaction. These findings further illustrate that the educational value of gamification cannot be understood solely through motivational outcomes, as its influence extends to the social processes that underpin effective language learning.

Reassessing the educational value of gamification

The findings reviewed in this paper suggest that the educational value of gamification in English language learning extends beyond the motivational outcomes that dominate existing literature. Although motivation has frequently been identified as the primary benefit of gamification, a closer examination of contemporary studies indicates that its influence is considerably more complex and multidimensional. The affective, cognitive, and social benefits identified across the literature are not isolated outcomes but rather interconnected processes that collectively contribute to language learning. Increased motivation, for instance, may encourage greater participation in learning activities, which subsequently creates opportunities for vocabulary development, language practice, and collaborative interaction. In this sense, motivation should be viewed not as the ultimate outcome of gamification but as a facilitating mechanism that supports broader educational development. This observation raises an important concern regarding the current direction of gamification research. A substantial proportion of studies continue to evaluate the effectiveness of gamification primarily through motivational indicators such as engagement, enjoyment, and participation (Wafa and Kusumaningtyas, 2026; Arip and Hashim, 2024; Nhan, 2024). While these variables are undoubtedly important, an exclusive focus on motivation risks reducing educational effectiveness to indicators of engagement rather than indicators of meaningful learning. Learners may demonstrate increased enthusiasm and participation during gamified activities without necessarily achieving meaningful improvements in language competence. Consequently, measuring success solely through motivational outcomes risks overestimating the effectiveness of gamification and neglecting more substantive indicators of language development.

Furthermore, the literature suggests that the educational benefits of gamification are closely associated with pedagogical design rather than the mere presence of game elements. The widespread assumption that points, badges, and leaderboards automatically improve learning outcomes has been increasingly challenged by recent research. Instead, the effectiveness of gamification appears to depend on how game elements are integrated with learning objectives, instructional strategies, and assessment practices. Gamification should therefore be understood as a pedagogical framework rather than a collection of technological features or reward mechanisms. Without meaningful alignment between game mechanics and educational goals, gamified activities may produce superficial engagement that fails to support deeper learning processes. The findings also indicate that the relationship between affective, cognitive, and social outcomes is more dynamic than often portrayed in the literature. Positive emotional experiences can enhance cognitive engagement, while collaborative interactions may strengthen both motivation and language development. This interconnectedness suggests that future research should move beyond examining isolated outcomes and instead adopt more holistic perspectives that recognise the complex interactions among different dimensions of learning. Such an approach would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how gamification influences language acquisition and learner development. More importantly, it would help address the tendency to evaluate gamification through isolated outcomes rather than through its broader contribution to language learning.

Challenges, contradictions, and contextual limitations

Despite the overwhelmingly positive portrayal of gamification within educational literature, a critical examination reveals several inconsistencies and limitations that warrant attention. One of the most frequently debated issues concerns the reliance on extrinsic rewards as a mechanism for increasing learner participation (Samson and Karthiga, 2020). While points, badges, and rewards may initially stimulate engagement, some scholars have questioned whether such incentives genuinely promote meaningful learning or merely encourage short-term behavioural compliance (Al-Khresheh, 2025). Learners may become motivated to collect rewards rather than to engage meaningfully with language-learning tasks (Chan and Lo, 2024). This concern is particularly relevant in English language learning, where sustained practice and intrinsic interest are essential for long-term success. Another challenge relates to the sustainability of gamification effects. Many studies report positive outcomes immediately following the implementation of gamified interventions; however, evidence regarding long-term effectiveness remains limited (Kumar and Hashim, 2024). The novelty effect may partially explain the favourable results reported in some studies, as learners often demonstrate heightened enthusiasm when exposed to new and interactive learning experiences. Over time, however, the motivational impact of gamification may diminish as learners become accustomed to the game elements (Nik Fauzi et al., 2025). This possibility raises important questions regarding whether gamification produces lasting educational benefits or merely generates temporary increases in engagement. The scarcity of longitudinal research makes it difficult to determine the durability of reported outcomes. As a result, claims regarding the long-term effectiveness of gamification should be interpreted with caution.

The literature also presents contradictory findings regarding competitive game elements such as leaderboards and ranking systems. While some studies suggest that

competition can enhance motivation and encourage greater effort, others report that excessive competition may increase anxiety, discourage lower-performing learners, and reduce participation (Gini et al., 2025; Ismar and Rahma, 2025; Fuentes and Expósito, 2024). Such inconsistencies highlight the importance of considering learner diversity when designing gamified learning environments. Educational interventions that motivate highly competitive learners may produce different outcomes among learners who prefer collaborative or non-competitive learning experiences (Hamuddin et al., 2024). Therefore, assumptions regarding the universal effectiveness of particular gamification elements oversimplify the diverse needs and preferences of language learners and should be treated with caution. Additionally, contextual factors appear to play a significant role in determining the effectiveness of gamification. Variables such as age, language proficiency, cultural background, technological accessibility, and teacher expertise may substantially influence learning outcomes (Rachman et al., 2024). Studies conducted in technologically advanced educational settings often report more favourable results than those implemented in resource-constrained environments (Toraja, 2026; Fatah, 2025). Similarly, differences in instructional design, duration of intervention, and assessment methods contribute to considerable variation across findings. These contextual influences complicate efforts to generalise conclusions and suggest that the effectiveness of gamification may be highly dependent on local educational conditions. This suggests that successful implementation may require contextual adaptation rather than the direct adoption of existing gamification models.

Teacher readiness represents another underexplored issue within the literature. While considerable attention has been devoted to learner outcomes, relatively little research has examined the competencies required for educators to implement gamification effectively (Gini et al., 2025). Successful gamification requires more than the adoption of digital platforms; it demands thoughtful instructional planning, continuous monitoring, and alignment with learning objectives (Ismar and Rahma, 2025). Without adequate training and pedagogical understanding, educators may struggle to design meaningful gamified experiences, thereby limiting potential benefits. This issue highlights the need to view gamification not only as a learner-centred innovation but also as a pedagogical practice requiring professional expertise. Future discussions of gamification should therefore pay greater attention to teacher preparedness alongside learner outcomes.

Research gaps and future directions

Although research on gamification in English language learning has expanded significantly over the past decade, several important gaps remain. First, much of the existing literature focuses on motivation and engagement, often treating these variables as primary indicators of success (Toraja, 2026; Siregar and Degeng, 2025). Consequently, there is comparatively less evidence regarding the long-term impact of gamification on language proficiency, communicative competence, critical thinking, and learner autonomy. Future studies should move beyond engagement metrics and broaden the scope of investigation to include these outcomes in order to develop a more balanced understanding of educational effectiveness. Second, methodological limitations continue to characterise much of the current research. Many studies rely on relatively small samples, short intervention periods, and self-reported measures of learner perceptions (Wafa and Kusumaningtyas, 2026; Fatah, 2025). While such approaches provide valuable insights into learner experiences, they may not adequately

capture actual learning gains. Addressing these limitations requires greater methodological diversity including longitudinal studies, mixed-methods research, and comparative investigations that evaluate different gamification designs across varied educational contexts. Such approaches would strengthen the evidence base and provide more robust conclusions regarding the educational value of gamification.

A further gap concerns the limited attention given to specific language skills. Existing studies frequently examine overall engagement or general language achievement without distinguishing among speaking, listening, reading, and writing. As these skills involve different cognitive and communicative processes, future research should investigate how particular gamification strategies influence each area of language development. Such analyses would enable educators to make more informed decisions regarding the selection and implementation of gamified activities. They would also help determine whether certain gamification strategies are more effective for specific language skills than others. Finally, emerging technologies present promising opportunities for advancing gamification research and practice. Artificial intelligence, adaptive learning systems, learning analytics, and immersive technologies such as virtual and augmented reality offer new possibilities for creating personalised and responsive learning experiences. However, research examining the integration of these technologies within gamified English language learning environments remains relatively limited. Future investigations should explore how technological innovation can enhance not only learner engagement but also meaningful language development, inclusivity, and educational equity. Addressing these issues will contribute to a more sophisticated understanding of gamification as a pedagogical approach capable of supporting diverse learners in increasingly digital educational landscapes.

Conclusion

This critical review has examined the multidimensional benefits of gamification in English language learning, highlighting its educational value beyond the enhancement of learner motivation. Although motivation remains one of the most frequently reported outcomes in the literature, the findings reviewed in this paper demonstrate that the influence of gamification extends across affective, cognitive, and social dimensions of learning. From an affective perspective, gamification has been associated with increased learner confidence, reduced language anxiety, and more positive attitudes towards language learning. Cognitively, gamified learning environments have shown potential in supporting vocabulary acquisition, language proficiency development, knowledge retention, and sustained engagement with learning tasks. Socially, gamification has been found to promote collaboration, communication, and meaningful peer interaction, all of which contribute to more dynamic and learner-centred language learning experiences. The review further suggests that the effectiveness of gamification cannot be attributed solely to the presence of game elements such as points, badges, or leaderboards. Rather, its educational value appears to emerge from the meaningful integration of these elements within pedagogically sound learning environments. The literature indicates that gamification is most effective when it supports broader learning objectives and encourages active participation, continuous practice, and social interaction. Consequently, gamification should be viewed not merely as a motivational strategy but as a multifaceted pedagogical approach capable of supporting holistic learner development in English language learning contexts.

At the same time, this review has identified several challenges and limitations within the existing body of research. The predominance of studies focusing on short-term motivational outcomes, the limited number of longitudinal investigations, and the influence of contextual factors continue to constrain a comprehensive understanding of gamification's long-term educational impact. Furthermore, variations in instructional design, learner characteristics, and technological accessibility suggest that the effectiveness of gamification is not universal and should be interpreted within specific educational contexts. In conclusion, the growing body of evidence indicates that gamification holds considerable promise as an innovative approach to English language learning. However, its true educational significance lies not in its ability to make learning more enjoyable, but in its potential to foster meaningful language development through interconnected affective, cognitive, and social processes. Future research should continue to investigate these dimensions through more rigorous and diverse methodological approaches. Only then can researchers develop a more comprehensive understanding of how gamification contributes not merely to learner engagement, but to meaningful and sustainable language development in increasingly digital educational environments.

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Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there is no conflict of interest involve with any parties in this research study.

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