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Gamification in College English: Challenges and Solutions

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Abstract. With the increasing popularity of gamification in educational contexts, its application in college English teaching has garnered considerable attention for its potential to enhance motivation and learning outcomes. This study investigates the key challenges and potential solutions related to the integration of gamification into college-level English teaching. Employing case analysis and literature review methodologies, this research identifies three major obstacles: the potential decline of intrinsic motivation due to an over-reliance on extrinsic rewards, the technological and professional barriers hindering effective implementation, and the inadequacy of gamified metrics in assessing complex language competencies. In response to these issues, the study proposes tailored strategies such as personalized gamified teaching, enhanced teacher training and technological support, and the integration of traditional assessment methods with gamified indicators. These findings highlight the necessity of aligning gamification with motivational theory and pedagogical goals to ensure its sustainable and meaningful use in college English education.

Keywords: Gamification, College English Teaching, Challenges, Motivation

1. Introduction

Gamification, namely the introduction of game elements into non-game environments to leverage the motivational factors of games, has been recognized as having great educational value in the process of second language acquisition and teaching [1]. Research has shown that gamification is highly beneficial to college English teaching [2]. Its advantages mainly include language proficiency enhancement, emotional and motivational improvement, and the cultivation of comprehensive competencies [3]. However, the application of gamification in college English teaching remains beset by several challenges. These include the potential diminishment of intrinsic motivation, a misalignment between teaching design and learning objectives, technological barriers and resource inequities, concerns regarding assessment validity, and a lack of adequate teacher training. This study aims to identify the primary challenges encountered by educators and learners within the current context of gamification in college English education and to explore potential solutions to address these challenges in the future. By doing so, this study seeks to optimize the integration of gamification in college English instruction and promote more effective and sustainable language learning outcomes.

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2. Current challenges and future solutions

2.1. Major challenges faced

The integration of gamification into college English teaching, while promising, is not without its complications. As educational institutions seek to innovate classroom practices, various obstacles have emerged that hinder the full realization of gamification's potential.

2.1.1. Concerns about learning motivation

In college English classrooms, sustaining students' attention and augmenting their learning motivation have long presented a significant challenge. To address this issue, gamified teaching approaches have increasingly adopted extrinsic reward mechanisms, such as points, badges, and leaderboards, to stimulate short-term engagement and boost classroom participation. These strategies are grounded in Reinforcement Theory, which posits that behavior can be modulated and maintained through rewards and punishments. By providing positive reinforcement, such as awarding points for correct answers or recognizing top performers on leaderboards, gamification seeks to increase the likelihood of desired behaviors like active participation and task completion.

While these strategies can effectively capture students' attention and encourage immediate involvement, they may also lead to unintended consequences over time. Research suggests that an overemphasis on external incentives can undermine learners' intrinsic motivation by shifting their focus from the inherent satisfaction of learning to the pursuit of rewards. Following the removal of extrinsic rewards, student engagement may plummet, potentially leading to even lower levels of motivation than would have been observed had gamification not been implemented [4].

On the one hand, for college students who are already interested in language learning, when a reward mechanism is introduced into the classes they are already interested in, it may make them feel restricted or forced. These additional rewards are regarded by students as a means of control, which makes them feel unconfident, reduces their satisfaction with the course, and leads to a lack of motivation to continue learning. Even if they fully embrace the introduction of gamification, the result may still backfire as the over-justification effect takes hold. This phenomenon, known as the overjustification effect, arises when individuals initially engage in a task out of intrinsic interest, but subsequently receive tangible rewards upon completion and begin to anticipate similar rewards in the future. In essence, when students who are originally motivated by their interest are provided with extrinsic rewards, their motivation may shift from an intrinsic "I want to do this" to an extrinsically driven "I am doing this for the reward" [5].

On the other hand, for college students who are bored with English learning and lack the willingness to participate in classroom activities, the positive effects of gamification may only be temporary. This may be related to the novelty effect of gamification. In traditional classrooms, the initial introduction of game elements can be exciting. However, over time, this sense of novelty tends to fade [6]. Therefore, while rewards may temporarily encourage task completion, the removal of such incentives often results in a loss of motivation, as students no longer perceive a compelling reason to persist.

This disconnection between the original intention of gamification and expected learning outcomes can confuse students about the real goals of their learning and even create the illusion of progress when, in fact, language proficiency remains underdeveloped. Teachers also perceive this as a primary obstacle to implementing gamification in their courses, citing concerns such as "overstimulation or addiction to gameplay, which may lead students to neglect other learning

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activities, lack of resources, and subject fit" [7]. When students begin to equate success with game-related achievements rather than with linguistic competence, the educational value of gamification is seriously undermined.

2.1.2. Barriers to effective implementation

The effective implementation of gamification often places a greater demand on technological conditions and instructional resources. Compared to traditional pedagogy, gamified teaching typically requires higher levels of technological infrastructure, including access to personal devices, reliable internet connectivity, and appropriate digital platforms. However, due to uneven regional development, inconsistent educational philosophies, and inequitable distribution of teaching resources, these requirements are not universally met across institutions [8].

Negative situations such as the lack of hardware infrastructure in the classroom, the difficulty of finding educational computer games that address the subject in the native language, the lack of game software for certain courses, the lack of technology, and the problem of internet connection are extremely common during the process of gamified teaching, which is one of the main reasons why many college English teachers are reluctant to use this teaching method [7].

In addition to hardware constraints, professional limitations further hinder the adoption of gamification. Many college English teachers lack adequate training in educational technology and game-informed pedagogy, as existing research has found that teachers sometimes cannot clearly define the roles they need to assume when using digital educational games in the teaching process [9]. This condition makes it difficult for them to design effective gamified activities with meaningful language learning objectives, let alone implement them in a proper way.

Even if teachers are able to design effective English lessons that integrate gamification and overcome the technical barriers, they may still encounter challenges related to classroom discipline management during instruction. Gamification, by nature, introduces elements of competition, play, and unpredictability into the learning environment. Without careful planning and classroom management, these elements may lead to distractions, off-task behaviors, or unequal participation, especially when students focus more on winning the game than engaging with language content. Teachers report difficulties in maintaining order and balancing engagement with accountability, particularly in larger classes or when games are not directly tied to learning outcomes.

What's more, in the process of English language teaching, there is a limited supply of high-quality educational and serious games suitable for the university level, which is insufficient to meet the diverse instructional needs English language skills. And the development of such games requires substantial financial and human resource investment. The developers must also bear the risk of low user engagement due to limited entertainment value [4]. This has also become one of the key obstacles to the effective implementation of gamified English instruction.

2.1.3. Limitations in assessing learning outcomes

A further challenge lies in the difficulty of ensuring valid and reliable assessment of students' language proficiency. Traditional assessment methods, such as standardized tests, essays, or oral presentations, are typically designed to evaluate students' grasp of vocabulary, grammar, comprehension, and communicative ability. In contrast, gamified systems often rely on alternative metrics such as point accumulation, progress bars, and leaderboard rankings to indicate achievement. While these indicators can be effective in measuring participation or task completion, they may not accurately reflect students' true language competence or progress in areas such as

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speaking fluency, critical reading, or academic writing. In addition, college English curricula typically emphasize comprehensive language skills development, including intercultural communication, critical thinking, and contextual language use. These complex competencies are difficult to quantify through simplified gamified indicators, which raises concerns about construct validity. If assessment in a gamified environment focuses too narrowly on what is easy to measure, it risks neglecting the broader cognitive and communicative goals of language education.

2.2. Potential solutions to current challenges

To overcome the aforementioned obstacles and enhance the effectiveness of gamified English instruction, corresponding strategies should be adopted.

2.2.1. Personalized gamified teaching

In addressing the concerns about learning motivation in gamified college English teaching, it is crucial to consider the voluntary nature of play. As play is inherently optional, a gamified system should be designed as one that students can choose to engage with rather than being compelled [10]. Due to the varied needs and motivational profiles of students, the gamification process should be personalized. For instance, certain competitive elements may stress some students, while others may find them motivating. Similarly, some students may benefit from the engaging nature of gamification, while others may find it disruptive [5]. Some are motivated by rankings, others by collaboration or creativity. Therefore, it's essential to assess individual needs beforehand and offer students choices within the system to promote autonomy and sustain intrinsic motivation.

However, regardless of the type of students, gamification in college English teaching should be firmly based on motivational theory, in line with clear learning objectives, and crafted to inspire curiosity, autonomy, and meaningful social interaction [8].

2.2.2. Building foundations for effective gamification

To ensure gamification can be sustainably and effectively integrated into college English teaching, it is essential to accelerate the development of forward-thinking educational philosophies, deepen curriculum reform, and promote interdisciplinary research and practice. The emergence of "light-gamified" educational software—platforms that integrate select game elements within a pedagogically-driven framework—offers a practical approach to implementation. This approach allows gamification to be introduced even in resource-limited regions by enhancing existing tools rather than requiring entirely new systems. At the same time, teachers must update their mindsets, move beyond traditional views, actively engage in professional learning, and embrace innovation to keep pace with educational advancements. By doing so, they can adopt more flexible and modern teaching strategies suited to today's learners [5].

2.2.3. Integration with traditional assessment method

To deal with the mismatch between gamified performance indicators and actual language proficiency, it is recommended to integrate gamified indicators like points and leaderboards with traditional assessment methods such as tests, essays, and oral presentations. This comprehensive approach provides a more accurate and valid assessment of students' learning outcomes.

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3. Conclusion

This study has examined the current challenges and prospective solutions in the application of gamification within the context of college English teaching. The findings indicate that while gamification offers significant potential to enhance learner engagement and diversify instructional methods, its practical implementation faces several constraints. Chief among these are concerns regarding the possible decline in intrinsic motivation due to overreliance on extrinsic rewards, insufficient technological and pedagogical support for instructors, and the inadequacy of gamified tools in fully capturing students' comprehensive language proficiency.

In response to these issues, the paper has proposed three targeted solutions. First, personalized gamified instruction, tailored to learners' individual needs and learning trajectories, can foster deeper motivation and more meaningful engagement. Second, systematic institutional support—including technological investment and teacher training—can enhance the feasibility and sustainability of gamified pedagogy. Third, a blended assessment model that integrates gamified performance data with traditional evaluative tools can offer a more reliable and holistic understanding of learner progress.

Despite its contributions, this study is limited by its theoretical orientation and reliance on secondary sources. Future research should incorporate empirical data through classroom-based interventions and longitudinal studies to evaluate the effectiveness of proposed solutions in diverse educational settings and to further refine gamification strategies in alignment with pedagogical goals.

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