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GAMIFICATION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: A REVIEW OF ITS EFFECTS ON LEARNER MOTIVATION AND AUTONOMY

Abstract. Gamification, the use of points, badges, leaderboards, challenges, and feedback, has become a prominent approach in English language teaching (ELT), yet the evidence on its effects is promising but inconsistent. Because the studies differ widely in participants, tools, and designs, a qualitative thematic synthesis was used instead of a meta-analysis. The literature falls into three groups: evidence syntheses, experimental or quasi-experimental interventions, and perception-based or documentary analyses, with Self-Determination Theory as the dominant theoretical lens. Motivation was the most consistently reported positive outcome, followed by engagement and short-term language gains, while autonomy and self-regulation were reported less often and usually as secondary outcomes. Autonomy benefits were most visible when gamification included learner choice, self-pacing, goal-setting, or explicit self-regulation support. Findings also revealed contradictions, including short-lived effects and the risk that poorly designed reward systems undermine intrinsic motivation or increase anxiety. Key gaps include limited long-term evidence, few direct comparisons of individual and collaborative gamification, an overrepresentation of vocabulary relative to speaking and listening, and a lack of studies isolating specific game elements. The review concludes that gamification is effective when aligned with pedagogical goals, learner profiles, and technological conditions, and calls for longer-term designs and clearer measures of autonomy.

Keywords: gamification, English language teaching, motivation, learner autonomy, self-regulation, Self-Determination Theory

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INGLIZ TILINI O’QITISHDA GEYMIFIKATSIYA: MOTIVATSIYA VA O’QUVCHI MUSTAQILLIGINI OSHIRISH VOSITASI SIFATIDA

Annotatsiya. Geymifikatsiya, ya’ni ballar, nishonlar, yetakchilar jadvali, topshiriqlar va fikr-mulohazadan foydalanish, ingliz tilini o’qitishda ko’zga ko’ringan yondashuvga aylandi, biroq uning samaradorligi haqidagi dalillar umidli, ammo bir-biriga zid. Tadqiqotlar ishtirokchilari, vositalari va dizayni jihatidan sezilarli farq qilgani uchun metatahlil o’rniga sifatli tematik sintez qo’llandi. Adabiyotlar uch guruhga bo’linadi: dalillarni umumlashtiruvchi sharhlar, eksperimental yoki kvazieksperimental aralashuvlar hamda idrokka asoslangan yoki hujjatli tahlillar. Asosiy nazariy asos o’z-o’zini belgilash nazariyasidir. Motivatsiya eng izchil qayd etilgan ijobiy natija bo’ldi, undan keyin faollik va qisqa muddatli til yutuqlari turadi, avtonomiya va o’z-o’zini boshqarish esa kamroq va

odatda ikkinchi darajali natija sifatida qayd etilgan. Avtonomiya bo'yicha foyda geymifikatsiya o'quvchi tanlovi, individual sur'at, maqsad qo'yish yoki o'z-o'zini boshqarishni aniq qo'llab-quvvatlashni o'z ichiga olganda eng yaqqol namoyon bo'ldi. Shuningdek, qarama-qarshiliklar aniqlandi, jumladan ta'sirlarning qisqa muddatliligi hamda yomon o'ylangan mukofot tizimlari ichki motivatsiyani susaytirishi yoki xavotirni oshirishi xavfi kabilar. Asosiy bo'shliqlar: uzoq muddatli dalillarning cheklanganligi, individual va jamoaviy gamifikatsiyaning bevosita taqqoslanishi kamligi, so'z boyligi o'rganilishining gapirish va tinglab tushunishga nisbatan ustunligi hamda alohida o'yin elementlari ta'sirini ajratib ko'rsatadigan tadqiqotlar yo'qligi. Xulosa shuki, gamifikatsiya pedagogik maqsadlar, o'quvchilar xususiyatlari va texnologik sharoitlarga mos kelganda samarali bo'ladi. Ushbu yondashuvda uzoqroq muddatli tadqiqotlar va avtonomiyani aniqroq o'lchash zarurati mavjuddir.

Kalit so'zlar: geymifikatsiya(o'yinlashtirish), ingliz tilini o'qitish, motivatsiya, o'quvchi avtonomiyasi, o'z-o'zini boshqarish, O'z-o'zini yo'naltirish nazariyasi

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ГЕЙМИФИКАЦИЯ В ОБУЧЕНИИ АНГЛИЙСКОМУ ЯЗЫКУ КАК ИНСТРУМЕНТ ПОВЫШЕНИЯ МОТИВАЦИИ И УЧЕБНОЙ АВТОНОМИИ УЧАЩИХСЯ

Аннотация. Геймификация, то есть использование баллов, значков, таблиц лидеров, заданий и обратной связи, стала заметным подходом в преподавании английского языка, однако данные о её эффективности многообещающи, но противоречивы. Поскольку исследования существенно различаются по выборкам, инструментам и дизайну, вместо метаанализа использовался качественный тематический синтез. Литература делится на три группы: обобщающие обзоры, экспериментальные и квазиэкспериментальные вмешательства, исследования восприятия и документальный анализ. Доминирующей теоретической основой является теория самодетерминации. Мотивация оказалась наиболее стабильно фиксируемым положительным результатом, за ней следуют вовлечённость и краткосрочный прогресс в языке, тогда как автономия и саморегуляция упоминаются реже и, как правило, как второстепенные результаты. Преимущества для автономии были наиболее заметны, когда геймификация предполагала выбор обучающегося, индивидуальный темп, постановку целей или явную поддержку саморегуляции. Обнаружены и противоречия, в том числе кратковременность эффектов и риск того, что плохо продуманные системы вознаграждения подрывают внутреннюю мотивацию или повышают тревожность. Основные пробелы: недостаток долгосрочных данных, малое число прямых сравнений индивидуальной и коллективной геймификации, преобладание изучения лексики над говорением и аудированием, отсутствие работ, выделяющих влияние отдельных игровых элементов. Делается вывод, что геймификация эффективна, когда согласована с педагогическими целями, особенностями обучающихся и технологическими условиями. Необходимы более долгосрочные исследования и более чёткие способы измерения автономии.

Ключевые слова: геймификация, преподавание английского языка, мотивация, автономия обучающихся, саморегуляция, теория самодетерминации

INTRODUCTION

Gamification has become a prominent instructional approach in English language teaching because it integrates points, badges, leaderboards, challenges, feedback, and other game elements into language learning environments to

increase engagement and persistence [Alenazi, 2025:2584-2591]. Across reviews and empirical studies, motivation is the most consistently reported benefit, and autonomy is also recurrently identified as a positive outcome, especially in digital and self-paced environments [Ameen, 2026]. According to Deci and Ryan, Gamified environments satisfy Self-Determination Theory's three psychological needs — autonomy, competence, and relatedness — which collectively sustain intrinsic motivation and self-directed learning.

In this context, gamification should be distinguished from game-based learning. Game-based learning normally uses a complete game as the principal environment or material for learning, whereas gamification incorporates selected game-design elements into activities that remain part of a broader instructional programme. This distinction is important for interpreting the reviewed studies because digital platforms, classroom quizzes, board games, and serious games do not necessarily create the same learning conditions. Their common feature is the purposeful use of game-related structures, but the pedagogical function of those structures may differ. Points can make progress visible, badges can recognize achievement, leaderboards can introduce a social dimension, and challenges can organize practice around attainable goals. Feedback, in turn, can help learners understand both the result of an activity and the next step required for improvement.

The relevance of gamification to language education is connected with the nature of language learning itself. Developing communicative competence requires repeated practice, willingness to participate, tolerance of mistakes, and sustained engagement with language input and output. Learners may understand the importance of practice but still experience routine exercises as repetitive or difficult to maintain. Game elements can give such activities a clearer structure and provide more immediate indications of progress. Nevertheless, an attractive format does not automatically ensure meaningful learning. A task remains educationally valuable only when its content, level of difficulty, feedback, and expected outcome are connected to the language objectives of the lesson. Therefore, motivation should be considered alongside the quality of learning and the extent to which learners gradually assume responsibility for their progress.

Gamification in ELT consistently boosts motivation and supports learner autonomy across diverse settings and age groups, but its durability beyond initial exposure remains uncertain and careful instructional design is essential to avoid undermining intrinsic motivation.

The review is warranted because the evidence base is both promising and internally inconsistent. Several sources report gains in motivation, engagement, vocabulary learning, participation, and self-regulation, while others note short-lived effects, risks from excessive competition or extrinsic rewards, and large differences by design quality, learner characteristics, and access to technology [Chu, S. K. W. et al, 2022]. The central problem is not whether gamification can help, but under what conditions it improves motivation and learner autonomy in English learning without reducing intrinsic motivation or narrowing learning to superficial reward-seeking [Zhang & Crawford, 2023: 1-23].

Current gaps are clear across the corpus. Long-term effects remain underexamined, evidence across different language skills is uneven, adult learners are less often isolated analytically, direct comparisons of individual versus collaborative gamification are scarce, and few studies identify which specific game elements drive autonomy rather than short-term excitement [Ameen, 2026]. The aim of this Review article is to synthesize published research on how gamification in ELT influences learner motivation and autonomy, identify the dominant theoretical and methodological approaches, evaluate contradictions in findings, and outline the most concrete directions for future research [Zhang & Crawford, 2023: 1-23].

METHODS

This paper is based on the 20 studies supplied in the source set, spanning 2019 to 2026, and including systematic reviews, scoping reviews, quasi-experiments, mixed-methods studies, survey studies, documentary reviews, and qualitative interview research. The database coverage reported within these studies includes Web of Science, Scopus, PubMed, CINAHL, Cochrane Library, ERIC, Embase, and e-Book

sources, with the two major review papers explicitly using Scopus and Web of Science, and the broader scoping review following PRISMA-ScR procedures across seven databases.

The methodological approach was selected to accommodate this diversity rather than to produce a single numerical estimate of effectiveness. The corpus combines studies that differ in their research questions, participant groups, instructional settings, intervention periods, technological tools, and outcome measures. A systematic review may summarize a wider body of evidence, while a classroom intervention may provide detailed information about a particular platform or teaching arrangement. Survey and interview studies, meanwhile, can describe how learners and teachers perceive the experience, but perceptions are not identical to demonstrated language gains. Treating these forms of evidence as interchangeable would obscure their different contributions. The thematic approach makes it possible to compare recurring patterns while retaining the distinctions between reported attitudes, observed participation, and measured performance.

Search terms are reported only in part by the source papers. One systematic review states that it used 15 related key terms for gamified EFL/ESL instruction, while the documentary review reports temporality and thematic relevance as search criteria for motivation, gamification, and English learning [Zhang, 2023]. Because the full keyword strings are not consistently available across all 20 papers, this review limits itself to the topics explicitly represented in the retrieved corpus: gamification, digital game-based learning, game-based learning, English language teaching, EFL, ESL, motivation, engagement, vocabulary, self-regulation, and autonomy.

Inclusion was limited to studies in the supplied corpus that examined gamification or game-based language learning in English teaching and reported outcomes relevant to motivation, engagement, autonomy, self-regulation, participation, or language learning performance [Kharizmi et al., 2024]. Exclusion, by implication, applies to work outside English language education, papers without outcome reporting, and claims not stated in the supplied evidence excerpts [Zolfaghari et al., 2025]. The analysis used qualitative thematic synthesis rather than meta-analysis because the studies vary substantially in participants, tools, delivery modes, outcomes, and research designs [Zolfaghari & Crawford, 2025].

RESULTS

The literature organizes around three main approaches: broad evidence syntheses, experimental or quasi-experimental intervention studies, and perception-oriented or documentary analyses [Zolfaghari et al., 2025]. Systematic and scoping reviews consistently report that motivation is the most frequent positive outcome in gamified English teaching, followed by engagement, knowledge gains, attitude change, and, less often, self-regulation or autonomy [Dehghanzadeh et al., 2019 934-957]. Theoretical interpretation is dominated by Self-Determination Theory, with autonomy, competence, and relatedness used to explain why feedback, challenge, choice, and progress visibility can strengthen internalized motivation [Zhang & Crawford, 2023].

The three groups of studies make complementary contributions to the overall picture. Evidence syntheses are useful for identifying repeated tendencies across a larger research field and for showing which outcomes receive the greatest attention. Intervention studies provide more direct information about what happens when a particular gamified approach is introduced in a learning environment. Perception-oriented and documentary studies add information about learner experience, teacher evaluation, and the concepts used to explain the observed outcomes. At the same time, each group has limitations: broad reviews may combine heterogeneous interventions, individual experiments may be tied to a specific context, and perception studies cannot by themselves establish causal effects on language achievement. The convergence of findings across these different forms of evidence is therefore more informative than any single result considered in isolation.

Intervention studies generally report higher motivation under gamified conditions. Experimental classrooms using Kahoot, Quizlet, and Duolingo showed higher motivation and engagement than traditional instruction, Quizizz-based formative assessment improved internalization

and produced 89.05% accuracy versus 74.01% in controls, and board-game or serious-game formats also improved motivation and learning outcomes [Liu et al, 2024: 10-36]. Higher-education evidence points in the same direction: 202 university students in Bosnia and Herzegovina showed a significant motivation effect, and an 8-week gamified flipped model raised participation by 25% and out-of-class study time by 30% [Huseinović, 2023:10-36].

Autonomy outcomes are positive but less directly studied than motivation. Individualized or self-paced gamification supports autonomous and personalized learning, digital game-based learning with Duolingo fostered a sense of autonomy among Chinese EFL learners, and expert system scaffolding improved self-regulation by directing attention to goal-setting and learning strategies [Chu et al., 2022]. Documentary and survey-based studies also report increased autonomy, participation, self-directed learning interest, and independent learning strategies, but these outcomes are usually secondary to motivation rather than the primary endpoint [Kharizmi et al., 2024].

Current trends show heavy concentration in Asia, strong use of online delivery and mobile learning, and frequent reliance on feedback, challenges, leaderboards, badges, and points [Zolfaghari et al., 2025]. Vocabulary learning is overrepresented relative to other skills, with strong examples from Quizizz, digital vocabulary games, mobile apps, and game-based vocabulary interventions (Liu et al., 2025: 1347-1364]. Speaking and listening appear in the corpus, but far less often than vocabulary and general motivation outcomes [Huseinović, 2023: 10-36].

Contradictions are substantial. Some studies find no lasting effect on final outcomes despite short-run benefits, some teachers question effectiveness, and several authors warn that poorly designed reward systems can undermine intrinsic motivation or increase anxiety for less competitive learners [Zhang & Crawford 2023: 1-23].

Comparative Findings

Focus	Evidence Pattern	Representative Support
Motivation	Most consistently positive outcome	Zolfaghari (2025)
Autonomy	Positive, but less frequently measured directly	Ameen (2026)
Self-Regulation	Improved when scaffolding is explicit	Chu (2022)
Long-Term Effects	Understudied and often unclear	Alenazi (2025)
Skill Coverage	Vocabulary dominates, speaking/listening thinner	Alenazi (2025)

Figure 1. Comparative patterns in gamification research for English language teaching.

DISCUSSION

The strongest conclusion is that gamification tends to improve motivation in ELT across multiple designs, age groups, and delivery formats, and that this motivational advantage often coincides with higher engagement, participation, and better short-term language outcomes [Huseinović, 2023: 10-36]. The evidence for learner autonomy is positive but narrower. Autonomy gains are most visible when gamification includes learner choice, self-pacing, mobile access, goal-setting, or explicit self-regulated learning support rather than only points and competition [Chu et al., 2022: 1-16].

The findings are consistent with an interpretation of gamification through Self-Determination Theory. The theory emphasizes autonomy, competence, and relatedness as psychological needs relevant to the quality of motivation. In a language-learning activity, a manageable challenge and informative feedback may support a sense of competence; meaningful choice and opportunities to control the pace of work may support autonomy; and cooperative tasks or constructive social interaction may contribute to relatedness. The reviewed studies use this theoretical perspective to explain why particular game elements may encourage engagement. Nevertheless, the presence of points or badges alone does

not demonstrate that these needs are being supported. Their influence depends on how learners experience the activity and whether the design gives them a meaningful role in learning.

The most striking gap is the mismatch between frequent motivation claims and the much thinner direct evidence on autonomy, self-regulation, and long-term language development. Reviews repeatedly identify motivation as the dominant reported outcome, while autonomy appears less often and usually as a secondary benefit rather than a primary, operationalized construct [Zolfaghari et al., 2025]. This gap persists because many studies rely on short quasi-experimental designs, platform-based interventions, and immediate post-tests rather than longer follow-up designs that could distinguish novelty effects from durable autonomous learning habits [Alenazi, 2025: 2584-2591].

The measurement of autonomy is a central methodological issue. Motivation can be investigated through questionnaires, observations, participation records, and other indicators, but autonomy is more difficult to capture through a single measure. A learner's stated preference for independent work may not correspond to consistent self-regulatory behaviour, and frequent platform use may reflect external requirements rather than self-directed engagement. Future studies would benefit from combining learner reports with evidence of goal-setting, planning, task selection, monitoring, persistence, and reflection. Repeated measurement over time would also help distinguish a temporary response to a new learning tool from the development of more stable independent-learning practices.

A second gap is the lack of head-to-head comparisons between gamification models. Direct comparisons between individual and collaborative gamification remain scarce even though the literature suggests they may support different outcomes, with individualized formats favoring autonomy and collaborative formats favoring peer interaction [Ameen, 2026]. A third gap is uneven skill coverage, because vocabulary learning is studied far more often than speaking or listening, limiting claims about gamification as a general ELT solution [Chowdhury et al, 2024].

Critical evaluation across the corpus suggests that gamification works best when it is pedagogically aligned and not treated as a generic motivational overlay. Studies emphasizing immediate feedback, adaptive progression, challenge, and meaningful task completion report stronger benefits than work describing competition or rewards alone [Alenazi, 2025: 2584-2591]. By contrast, technical barriers, high game pace, weak debriefing, and overreliance on external rewards can limit or distort benefits [Kharizmi, 2024].

Implementation quality also includes the way teachers prepare learners for an activity and follow it up. Clear instructions, an appropriate level of difficulty, and a transparent connection to lesson objectives can help learners understand why they are participating. After a game, a short discussion or reflection can connect the activity to the language point being practised and help learners identify errors or strategies for improvement. Without this follow-up, learners may remember the competition or score more clearly than the language content. The importance of debriefing is therefore consistent with the broader conclusion that gamification should be embedded in a coherent teaching sequence rather than used as an isolated event.

Directions for further research are already consistent across the literature. Future studies should test long-term retention and motivation, compare individual and group gamification directly, expand beyond vocabulary to speaking and listening, isolate the effects of specific game elements, and examine more diverse learner populations and contexts, especially adult learners.

CONCLUSION

Gamification in English language teaching is a promising approach for improving motivation and can also support learner autonomy when its design includes learner choice, self-pacing, meaningful feedback, and opportunities for self-regulation. The literature shows stronger and more consistent evidence for motivational gains than for durable autonomy gains.

The review also indicates that positive outcomes should be interpreted with care. Increased enjoyment, participation, or time spent on a platform can be valuable, but these indicators do not necessarily demonstrate durable language development or independent learning. The strongest conclusions are therefore conditional: gamifica-

tion can contribute to motivation, and it may support autonomy when learners are offered meaningful choices and explicit opportunities to regulate their work. Its effectiveness depends on the relationship between game mechanics, instructional objectives, learner characteristics, and the conditions in which learning takes place.

Theoretically, the field is anchored mainly in motivational frameworks that explain why challenge, competence, and relatedness matter, but the evidence also shows that design quality and context determine effectiveness. Practically, gamification should be aligned with instructional objectives, learner profiles, and technological conditions rather than used as a universal solution.

Future review and empirical work should prioritize longer-term designs, clearer autonomy measures, direct comparisons among gamification models, and broader coverage of language skills beyond vocabulary.

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