

Unveiling Gamification in Undergraduate EFL Students' Grammar Classes: A Case Study at *Pesantren* (Islamic Boarding School) Based-University

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the application of gamification in grammar instruction at a Pesantren (Islamic boarding school) based University, aiming to improve student engagement and motivation in learning English grammar. The research uses a qualitative case study approach, involving 14 second-semester undergraduate students. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and document analysis to gain insights into students' experiences with gamified grammar lessons. The findings reveal that gamification significantly enhances student participation, making grammar lessons more enjoyable and interactive. Students reported greater motivation, enjoyment, and a deeper understanding of grammatical concepts, particularly using quizzes, leaderboards, and group activities. The study concludes that gamification can effectively address issues of disengagement in traditional grammar instruction while promoting collaboration and active learning. This research contributes to the growing body of evidence supporting the use of gamification in higher education and suggests that further exploration is needed to refine gamified strategies for diverse learning environments.

1. Introduction

In higher education, grammar instruction is an essential aspect of language learning that often presents several challenges (Illananingtyas, 2025; Masyhudianti et al., 2025; Rasyidah, 2025; Salim & Masyhudianti, 2024; Uswah, 2023). Among these challenges, student disengagement and low motivation stand out as significant barriers to the effective teaching of grammar. Grammar, while being fundamental to the structure and function of language, is often perceived by students as a tedious and overly complex subject. Traditional teaching methods, such as rote memorization and teacher-centered explanations, tend to fail in engaging students, particularly in a higher education context where students may have already experienced years of grammar instruction. As a result, students may struggle to internalize grammatical concepts and apply them proficiently in both written and spoken forms. This failure to engage can contribute to frustration and anxiety, ultimately hindering students' academic progress (Kitsnik & Mikk, 2021).

Furthermore, the intricacies of grammatical rules can overwhelm learners, leaving them unable to connect the theoretical knowledge to practical usage, which is crucial for developing fluency in a second language (Gelizon, 2024).

Research highlights that traditional methods of grammar instruction often lack the interactive and dynamic components needed to capture the attention of modern learners, especially those in higher education who are increasingly immersed in digital environments. According to Gelizon (2024), complex grammatical concepts, when presented through monotonous and non-interactive methods, often lead to confusion and disengagement. In contrast, innovative approaches such as gamification offer promising solutions to these challenges. Gamification, the integration of game-like elements into non-game environments, has emerged as a transformative educational tool. By introducing elements like points, levels, challenges, and rewards can significantly enhance learner motivation and engagement, gamification aims to make learning more engaging and enjoyable, while also reinforcing key educational concepts. Studies have demonstrated that gamification can significantly boost student motivation and participation, providing a more stimulating and enjoyable approach to learning (Almelhes, 2024; Tayeh et al., 2024).

In response to the growing need for innovative educational strategies, gamification presents an opportunity to revolutionize grammar instruction in higher education. It combines entertainment with educational objectives, transforming a traditionally dry subject into an interactive learning experience. As digital tools continue to proliferate, students, particularly in higher education, have increasingly developed preferences for interactive and technology-enhanced learning experiences. This trend is supported by research which suggests that digital-native students who have grown up in an environment rich with digital technology—tend to thrive in learning environments that incorporate interactive, game-based elements (Tayeh et al., 2024). By leveraging gamification, educators can cater to these evolving preferences, providing a learning experience that aligns more closely with students' expectations and learning styles. This can enhance not only the comprehension of grammar but also its retention and practical application in various communicative contexts.

The primary challenge addressed by this study is the low level of student engagement and motivation in traditional grammar lessons. Despite the crucial role of grammar in mastering any language, traditional methods often fail to inspire students or encourage them to engage with complex grammatical structures actively. As a result, students frequently approach grammar learning with resistance and disengagement, leading to suboptimal learning outcomes. The application of gamification to grammar instruction provides a potential solution to this issue. Gamification offers a way to integrate fun and competition into the learning process, encouraging students to participate more fully. Additionally, the gamified approach allows for immediate feedback, which is essential for language learners to monitor and improve their understanding of grammatical concepts in real time (Almelhes, 2024). The integration of game mechanics such as levels, points, and leaderboards into grammar instruction could motivate students by providing them with clear goals and rewarding progress.

Several studies support the effectiveness of gamification in improving language learning outcomes. For example, research by Pham (2023) demonstrated that students who engaged in grammar instruction through the gamified platform Quizizz showed significant improvement in grammar achievement compared to those who were taught using traditional methods. The research indicated that students found gamified grammar lessons more enjoyable, which helped maintain their interest and motivation throughout the learning process. Similarly, studies involving gamified strategies that incorporated role-playing and group work have shown improvements in student collaboration, interaction, and active participation (Gelizon, 2024). Gamification thus not only addresses the challenge of student disengagement but also fosters a collaborative learning environment that enhances the social aspect of language learning.

Moreover, specific methodologies within gamified learning, such as combining games with traditional teaching tasks, have proven instrumental in developing students' linguistic competencies. Pozdniakova et al. revealed that integrating gamification techniques in grammar instruction yielded significant improvements in grammatical speaking skills, illustrating the practical relevance of this approach in achieving educational goals (Pozdniakova et al., 2023). This notion reinforces the understanding that gamification is not merely about entertainment but strategically enhances the learning process by providing context, feedback, and interactive challenges.

The goal of this study is to explore how gamification can be implemented to enhance grammar instruction at the university level and to assess its effectiveness in motivating students to engage with complex grammatical concepts. This study aims to fill the gap in literature by investigating the use of gamification in a *Pesantren* (Islamic Boarding School) Based University and providing insights into its potential as a pedagogical tool. The novelty of this research lies in its practical application of gamification in a language classroom, offering empirical evidence of its impact on student motivation, engagement, and achievement in grammar learning conducted at *Pesantren* (Islamic Boarding School) Based University. By examining the student and teacher experiences with gamified grammar instruction, this study seeks to contribute to the growing body of research on innovative language teaching methods in higher education.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Participants

This qualitative study uses a case study design to explore undergraduate students' perspectives on the use of gamification in grammar instruction at a *Pesantren* (Islamic Boarding School) based university. The case study approach was selected to provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Gall et al., 2003). Participants included 14 second-semester undergraduate students from the English Education Department at Universitas Islam Tribakti Lirboyo Kediri in which 80% of the students stay at *Pesantren* (Islamic Boarding School) choosing using purposive sampling.

2.2 Instruments

Data collection involved multiple techniques: observation, interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted 6 times to examine the teaching and learning process using gamification. Non-participant observation was used, where the researchers only observed without actively engaging in the classroom activities. In-depth interviews were conducted with the lecturer and student. The researchers used a flexible, open, and unstructured approach to capture a comprehensive understanding of the students' and teacher's experiences. To support the findings, triangulation was employed, combining field notes, textbooks, and images.

2.3 Data Analysis Procedures

To support the findings, the validity of the data was assessed through the triangulation technique, which involved comparing observational and auditory data across multiple sources to strengthen the quality and reliability of the data, as well as to ensure the accuracy of the researcher's interpretation. The data collected through these methods were analyzed following the framework by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), which involves data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. This iterative process ensured that the data was carefully scrutinized and verified for accuracy.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. The Implementation of Teaching Grammar Using Gamification in *Pesantren* (Islamic Boarding School) Based University

The results of the study were derived from a combination of observation and document analysis, which provided insights into how gamification was implemented in a grammar instruction setting. The participants included 14 students residing at the *Pesantren* (Islamic Boarding School), alongside two students who stayed at home or in boarding houses. The cohort consisted of six males and eight females. Students who stay at *Pesantren* (Islamic Boarding School) are not allowed to use and bring handphones, so the students in the class did not use the phones. This study's results are in line with Pozdniakova et al. (2023), who found that incorporating gamification techniques into traditional grammar instruction led to significant improvements in students' grammatical speaking skills. The blend of task-based activities with gamified elements ensures that students are actively using the language while practicing grammar, making the learning experience both effective and engaging. The following is a breakdown of the key findings related to the application of gamification in the classroom that can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Description of the implementation of Gamification in teaching Grammar

| No. | Teaching Steps | Description |
|-----|---|--|
| 1. | Students Studying and Completing Tasks Before Class | Students were required to study and complete exercises related to the material before attending the class, ensuring foundational understanding. |
| 2. | The question-and-answer session in the class | The question-and-answer session in the class facilitated interactive discussions, allowing students to engage with the material by sharing their responses and addressing questions posed by their peers. The lecturer provided timely and constructive feedback, further enhancing the learning process and reinforcing key concepts. |
| 3. | Lecturer Using Game-Setting in Teaching | The lecturer incorporated game-like elements such as points, levels, and challenges to create an engaging and interactive learning environment. |
| 4. | Group Work Assignment | Students were divided into small groups of 3-4 members, promoting collaboration and peer interaction to complete tasks and answer questions. |
| 5. | Group Naming and Creation of a Password | Each group selected a unique name and a motivational password (e.g., "amazing," "incredible") to foster group identity and create a positive atmosphere. |
| 6. | Quiz-Related to the Material Being Taught | A quiz was administered based on the material taught, requiring students to apply their knowledge in a competitive setting to reinforce learning. |
| 7. | Creation of a Leaderboard | A leaderboard displayed group rankings based on quiz scores, fostering healthy competition and motivating students to improve their performance. |
| 8. | Totaling the Points | Points were totaled by both the lecturer and students, ensuring transparency and motivating students to participate actively to improve their scores. |
| 9. | Announcing the Winner | The winning group was announced and received additional points as a reward, further enhancing engagement and motivation through competition. |

The first observation revealed that prior to attending the class, students were required to engage with study materials and complete exercises related to the lesson. This pre-class task served to prepare students for the session and facilitated a foundational understanding of the topic being taught. By ensuring that students completed these tasks before coming to class, the lecturer established a baseline of readiness, allowing for more focused and interactive discussions during the class. This approach also helped students familiarize themselves with the subject matter, promoting active participation during subsequent activities.

Once in class, a significant portion of the lesson involved a question-and-answer session, which encouraged students to discuss their tasks and engage with each other. In this session, students were given the opportunity to answer questions posed by their peers, while also responding to questions from the lecturer. This dynamic exchange not only encouraged active participation but also fostered a collaborative learning environment where students could learn from one another. The lecturer played a pivotal role by providing feedback on the students' responses, reinforcing correct answers, and offering clarification

where needed. This interactive approach facilitated deeper engagement and helped reinforce the learning material.

Another important aspect of the implementation was the lecturer's use of a game-setting in teaching. The lecturer integrated gamification elements such as competitive activities, point scoring, and rewards to enhance the learning experience. This approach shifted the typical classroom atmosphere to one that was more engaging and motivating. By using elements commonly found in games—such as challenges and rewards, the lecturer was able to create a fun, competitive environment that stimulated student participation and enthusiasm for the subject. These findings resonate with previous research, such as that by Pham (2023), which demonstrated that tools like Quizizz significantly improved ESL learners' grammar achievement by making learning both enjoyable and competitive. As students were actively involved in these gamified activities, their willingness to participate increased, as did their motivation to engage with the learning material.

As part of the gamification strategy, the lecturer assigned students to small groups of three to four members. These groups were formed strategically by the lecturer to foster collaboration and teamwork among the students. The group work component of the lesson allowed students to share ideas, discuss the material, and collaboratively solve problems, further deepening their understanding of the content. By working together in small teams, students were able to engage in peer learning, supporting one another in the process of mastering grammatical concepts. In line with this, Membrive and Armie (2022) emphasized the importance of collaboration in gamified environments, noting that the social aspects of gamification foster a collective spirit among students. This was clearly evident in the study, as students worked in small groups, contributing to discussions, solving tasks together, and motivating each other.

Each group was tasked with selecting a group name and a password related to the theme of the lesson. The names of the groups were designed to reflect motivational or inspirational figures, such as Indonesian and international heroes, motivators, or pop singers. This creative approach added an element of fun to the learning process, as students could relate to these figures and draw inspiration from them. The use of passwords further encouraged team spirit and provided a sense of accomplishment when successfully answering questions or completing tasks. The passwords—motivational words such as "amazing," "excellent," and "incredible"—served as a reminder of the students' potential and achievements.

A key feature of the gamified approach was the use of quizzes, which were directly linked to the material being taught. These quizzes provided an opportunity for students to apply what they had learned and test their understanding of grammatical concepts. The quiz format encouraged healthy competition, with students aiming to achieve high scores. By incorporating quizzes into the lesson, the lecturer not only assessed students' knowledge but also kept them actively engaged and focused on the subject matter. The quizzes were an effective tool for reinforcing learning and maintaining student interest throughout the lesson. Gelizon (2024) reported that gamification not only supports specific language skills but also contributes to the broader development of cognitive and social skills. This was reflected in the students' responses, where many expressed a greater sense of enjoyment and satisfaction in completing grammar tasks.

Following the quizzes, a leaderboard was created to display the performance of each group. This leaderboard was updated in real-time, providing students with immediate feedback on their progress and ranking. The competitive nature of the leaderboard encouraged students to strive for excellence and fostered a sense of excitement and anticipation as they worked toward improving their standing. The use of a leaderboard also helped students track their individual and group performance, creating a sense of accomplishment as they climbed the ranks.

Finally, after the completion of all tasks and quizzes, the points accumulated by each group were tallied by both the lecturer and the students. This process of totaling points helped ensure transparency and fairness in the gamification system. The points were calculated based on the students' performance in the quizzes, their participation in group activities, and their contributions to class discussions. At the end of the lesson, the winner of the game was announced, with the top-performing group receiving additional points or rewards. This recognition served as both a motivational tool and a reinforcement of the learning objectives, highlighting the value of active participation and collaboration in achieving academic success. As supported by Cani et al. (2017) gamified strategies not only engage learners but also stimulate cognitive skills by making learning fun while promoting cognitive development through repeated efforts and rewards.

In conclusion, the results of this study demonstrate the effectiveness of gamification in enhancing student engagement, collaboration, and learning outcomes in grammar instruction. By integrating game-like elements such as quizzes, group activities, leaderboards, and rewards, the lecturer created a dynamic and motivating learning environment that encouraged students to actively participate in the lesson. The gamification approach not only made the learning process more enjoyable but also helped students internalize grammatical concepts more effectively.

Student's Response to the Implementation of Gamification in Grammar Learning in Higher Education

In the context of the English language teaching, the integration of gamification into grammar instruction has generated varied student responses, reflecting both the positive and negative aspects of this pedagogical approach. The interviews conducted with students provided valuable insights into their experiences, which revealed several benefits, and a few challenges associated with gamification in grammar teaching. The findings align with previous studies on gamified learning outcomes, highlighting its impact on student motivation, knowledge, focus, engagement, and collaboration.

Increasing Motivation and Engagement

One of the most frequently mentioned benefits of gamification, as identified in the interviews, was the increased enjoyment and reduced boredom in learning grammar. Research by Rainers and Wood (2015) suggests that gamification can make the learning process more engaging, thereby improving students' motivation and engagement. Students in this study echoed this sentiment, with several reporting that the gamified elements, such as quizzes and interactive activities, made the learning experience much more enjoyable. As one student (S₁) mentioned, "I find it fascinating. I feel excited and motivated because it feels like playing a game even though I'm answering questions, and

the information is simple to retain." Other students shared similar sentiments, highlighting that gamification made learning more dynamic and less monotonous. Another student (S₂) stated, "Makes learning more enjoyable for me and keeps me doing the quiz and game until the end of the learning." Similarly, Tayeh et al. found that gamification fostered a more engaging classroom atmosphere, leading to improved academic performance among EFL students when compared to traditional teaching methods (Tayeh et al., 2024). This enhancement in engagement supports the notion that students are more likely to participate in learning activities that feel less like formal education and more like enjoyable interactions.

Improving Students' Grammar Understanding

The students' responses clearly indicate that gamification has a positive impact on grammar learning. As S₃ stated, "I can understand easily the grammar material, I think it's effective to improve my grammar by using game," highlighting the ease of comprehension and the effectiveness of gamified methods in enhancing grammar skills. Similarly, S₅ expressed, "Using game, my understanding regarding grammar and the concept are increased, thus improving my grammar skill," further reinforcing the notion that gamification contributes to a deeper understanding of grammatical concepts. These observations align with Pham's (2023) findings, which showed that students who engaged in a ten-week intervention involving gamified quizzes demonstrated significant improvement in their grammar test results. These responses underscore that gamification not only enhances the appeal of grammar learning but also yields measurable improvements in students' grammatical proficiency, as it successfully combines engagement with educational outcomes.

Supporting collaborative learning and peer interaction

One of the core advantages of gamification is its capacity to foster collaborative learning through structured group activities. As S₇ mentioned, "I can collaborate with my groups to answer the questions in the form of a quiz," highlighting the importance of teamwork in solving grammatical challenges. Similarly, S₅ emphasized that "Communicating and collaborating are the key to win the game," further underlining the role of collaboration in achieving success. Gelizon (2024) underscores the effectiveness of strategies such as role-playing and group work, which are prevalent in gamified settings and contribute to enhanced literacy skills. These strategies provide opportunities for students to discuss grammatical concepts, support one another, and engage in collective problem-solving. Moreover, Tayeh et al. (2024) demonstrate that gamification positively impacts EFL students' academic performance by encouraging cooperation and peer interaction. The collaborative nature of gamified tasks not only strengthens grammar acquisition but also improves social skills and teamwork among students.

Enhanced Focus on Learning

In addition to making grammar learning enjoyable, gamification was found to motivate students to focus more on the material. According to Rainers and Wood (2015), the competitive aspects of gamification can help students maintain focus by introducing an element of challenge. In this study, the use of quiz and leaderboard encouraged students to stay attentive and engaged throughout the lesson. Many students reported that the quiz and leaderboard, as they were motivated to answer quickly and correctly to maintain their

rankings. One student (S2) commented, "Yes, the fact that there is a quiz and leaderboard motivate me to concentrate on answering questions." Another student (S8) stated, "I'm motivated because I can concentrate more on current questions." These findings align with Friedlander et al. (2011), who argued that the pressure generated by gamification's competitive nature can foster focus. However, it is important to note that not all students experienced this heightened focus. One student (S6) expressed indifference, stating, "It was just so so, I am not motivated." This response suggests that the effectiveness of gamification in enhancing focus may vary among individual students, which highlights the need for personalized approaches within gamified learning environments.

Satisfaction with Game Outcomes

Another significant aspect of the gamification experience was students' satisfaction with the results of the game. Rainers and Wood (2015) suggest that the competitive nature of gamified activities leads to a sense of accomplishment among the winners. This was evident in the interviews, where students who performed well in the gamified quizzes expressed satisfaction with their results. One student (S1) shared, "Yes I am happy although, I am not the winner, but it is okay, I will do my best in the next lesson." Similarly, another student (S8) said, "Yes, I am happy with the effort I put in on my own." These responses reflect a sense of pride and accomplishment, which is consistent with the findings of Tayeh et al. (2024), who observed significant improvements in academic performance through gamified instruction. However, some students were less satisfied with their performance, indicating a mixed response to the game outcomes. For instance, one student (S5) remarked, "Occasionally satisfied, occasionally not," while another (S6) expressed dissatisfaction with their score. These mixed reactions highlight that while gamification can boost motivation and performance, not all students may perceive their results as a success, suggesting the need for continued encouragement and support.

4. Conclusion

This study investigated the integration of gamification in grammar instruction for undergraduate EFL students at a *Pesantren* (Islamic Boarding School) Based University, aiming to enhance student engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes. The key findings indicate that the use of gamification significantly improved student motivation and participation in grammar learning. By incorporating game-like elements such as quizzes, points, leaderboards, and group activities, the learning environment became more interactive and enjoyable, fostering a dynamic classroom atmosphere. These findings align with previous studies, highlighting the positive impact of gamification on academic performance and student engagement in language learning. The main contribution of this study lies in its practical application of gamification in an educational setting where traditional methods often lead to student disengagement. It provides empirical evidence that gamification not only enhances student engagement but also improves their grammatical understanding and collaborative learning skills. Additionally, the use of gamified techniques such as peer interaction and feedback further supports the development of both cognitive and social skills. Future research could explore the long-term effects of gamification on grammar retention and its adaptability across different educational contexts. Further studies could also examine the role of individual differences in

the effectiveness of gamified learning, offering insights into how personalized gamification strategies could be developed to cater to diverse student needs. The findings of this study contribute to the growing body of knowledge on innovative teaching methods in higher education and emphasize the potential of gamification as a transformative tool for language learning.

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