

GAMIFICATION VS. GAME-BASED LEARNING: CLARIFYING THE DISTINCTION IN VOCABULARY INSTRUCTION

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Abstract. The concepts of gamification and game-based learning (GBL) are frequently conflated in applied linguistics literature, leading to inconsistent pedagogical frameworks and ambiguous research findings in lexical instruction. This article clarifies the theoretical and practical distinction between the two constructs within the domain of vocabulary teaching. Drawing on a systematic review of empirical and conceptual studies published between 2010 and 2024, this paper analyzes how each approach operationalizes motivation, learner engagement, and lexical acquisition differently. The findings suggest that gamification – the application of game design elements to non-game contexts – primarily leverages extrinsic motivation through mechanics such as points, badges, and leaderboards, while GBL employs complete game environments to foster deep, contextual vocabulary acquisition. Implications for EFL/ESL curriculum design, digital tool selection, and further research are discussed.

Keywords: gamification, game-based learning, vocabulary instruction, lexical acquisition, EFL, motivation, language pedagogy.

Annotatsiya. Gamifikatsiya va o'yinga asoslangan ta'lim (OAT) tushunchalari amaliy tilshunoslik adabiyotida ko'pincha bir-biriga qorishtiriladi, bu esa leksik ta'limdagi pedagogik tizimlarning nomuvofiqligi va tadqiqot natijalarining noaniqligiga olib keladi. Ushbu maqola ikkala konstruksiya o'rtasidagi nazariy va amaliy farqni so'z boyligini o'rgatish doirasida oydinlashtiradi. 2010–2024 yillar oralig'ida nashr etilgan empirik va kontseptual tadqiqotlarning tizimli tahlili asosida mazkur ish har bir yondashuvning motivatsiya, o'quvchi faoliyati va leksik o'zlashtirish jarayonini qanday turlicha ifodalashini tahlil qiladi. Natijalar shuni ko'rsatadiki, gamifikatsiya – o'yin dizayn elementlarini o'yindan tashqari muhitlarga qo'llash – asosan ball, nishon va reytinglar kabi mexanizmlar orqali tashqi motivatsiyadan foydalanadi, OAT esa chuqur, kontekstual leksik o'zlashtirishni rivojlantirish uchun to'liq o'yin muhitlaridan foydalanadi. Chet el tili sifatida ingliz tili (EFL/ESL) o'quv dasturini loyihalash, raqamli vositalarni tanlash va keyingi tadqiqotlar uchun xulosalar muhokama qilinadi.

Kalit so'zlar: gamifikatsiya, o'yinga asoslangan ta'lim, so'z boyligini o'rgatish, leksik o'zlashtirish, EFL, motivatsiya, til pedagogikasi.

Аннотация. Понятия геймификации и обучения на основе игр (ООИ) нередко смешиваются в литературе по прикладной лингвистике, что приводит к непоследовательным педагогическим концепциям и неоднозначным результатам исследований в области лексического обучения. В данной статье разъясняется теоретическое и практическое различие между этими двумя конструктами в контексте обучения лексике. На основе систематического обзора эмпирических и концептуальных исследований, опубликованных в период с 2010 по 2024 год, анализируется, каким образом каждый из подходов по-разному реализует мотивацию, вовлечённость обучающихся и лексическое усвоение. Результаты свидетельствуют о том, что геймификация – применение элементов игрового дизайна в неигровых контекстах – главным образом опирается на внешнюю мотивацию посредством таких механизмов, как баллы, значки и таблицы лидеров, тогда как ООИ задействует полноценную игровую среду для формирования глубокого, контекстуального усвоения лексики. Обсуждаются практические выводы для разработки учебных программ по EFL/ESL, выбора цифровых инструментов и дальнейших исследований.

Ключевые слова: геймификация, обучение на основе игр, обучение лексике, лексическое усвоение, EFL, мотивация, педагогика языка.

Introduction. The rapid expansion of digital technology in education has catalyzed a surge of interest in game-related pedagogical methods, particularly within foreign and second language teaching. Among the most widely discussed are *gamification* and *game-based learning* (GBL). Despite their increasing prominence in the literature and in classroom practice, these two approaches are frequently used interchangeably, creating significant conceptual confusion among educators, researchers, and curriculum designers (Deterding et al., 2011; Kapp, 2012).

This terminological imprecision is not merely academic. When practitioners conflate gamification with GBL, the result can be the misapplication of pedagogical tools, the misinterpretation of research outcomes, and ultimately, suboptimal learning environments. The stakes are particularly high in the domain of vocabulary instruction, where the depth and breadth of lexical knowledge – encompassing form, meaning, use, and retention – demand deliberately designed and theoretically grounded learning experiences (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2010).

Vocabulary acquisition is widely acknowledged as a foundational component of language proficiency (Nation, 2001). Learners must encounter words repeatedly, in varied contexts, and with sufficient cognitive engagement to consolidate them in long-term memory (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001). Both gamification and GBL claim to address these conditions, yet they do so through fundamentally different mechanisms. Gamification relies on motivational mechanics – points, badges, leaderboards, streaks – layered onto existing instructional frameworks. GBL, by contrast, places learners inside purposefully designed game environments where lexical encounters arise organically through gameplay (Mayer, 2019; Plass, Homer, & Kinzer, 2015).

Methods. This study employs a systematic review methodology, drawing on peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and empirical studies published between 2010 and 2024. A systematic review was selected because it allows for a rigorous, replicable synthesis of existing conceptual and empirical work across a well-defined scope (Gough, Oliver, & Thomas, 2012). Searches were conducted in the following databases: ERIC, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and JSTOR. The following search terms were used, both independently and in combination: *gamification*, *game-based learning*, *vocabulary acquisition*, *vocabulary instruction*, *EFL*, *ESL*, *second language acquisition*, *lexical development*, *digital games*, *language learning games*. Boolean operators (AND, OR) were applied to refine searches. Duplicate entries were removed at the screening stage.

Articles were included if they: (a) explicitly addressed gamification or GBL in the context of language learning or vocabulary instruction; (b) were peer-reviewed; (c) were published in English; and (d) were published between 2010 and 2024. Studies were excluded if they focused solely on non-language content areas without transferable implications for language pedagogy, or if they conflated gamification and GBL without definitional clarity. Following title, abstract, and full-text screening, a total of 62 sources

met inclusion criteria. Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring conceptual distinctions, empirical findings, and pedagogical recommendations. The categories of *definition*, *motivational mechanism*, *lexical outcome*, and *implementation context* served as analytical units.

Results. The reviewed literature reveals a persistent terminological ambiguity. Of the 62 sources analyzed, approximately 38% used “gamification” and “game-based learning” without explicit distinction. The remaining 62% offered definitions that, while not always consistent, revealed meaningful differences in scope, design logic, and pedagogical intent. Gamification was most commonly defined following Deterding et al. (2011) as “the use of game design elements in non-game contexts.” In language education, this translates into the overlay of game mechanics – points for completing exercises, badges for streaks, leaderboards for vocabulary quiz performance – onto otherwise conventional learning tasks. Platforms such as Duolingo, Quizlet, and Kahoot! were consistently cited as examples of gamified environments (Shortt et al., 2021; Hao et al., 2021).

Game-based learning, by contrast, was defined as the intentional use of games – digital or analog – as the primary vehicle for learning. In GBL, the game is not a motivational add-on but the instructional medium itself. Learners encounter vocabulary through narrative immersion, problem-solving, role-play, or competitive challenge within a coherent game world (Mayer, 2019; Plass, Homer, & Kinzer, 2015). Studies cited games such as *Minecraft Education Edition*, simulation-based RPGs, and purpose-built vocabulary games as representative GBL tools.

Table 1 below summarizes the key definitional distinctions identified in the reviewed literature.

Table 1. Key distinctions between gamification and game-based learning in vocabulary instruction

Dimension	Gamification	Game-Based Learning
Core definition	Game elements in non-game context	Complete game as instructional medium
Design logic	Motivational layer over existing task	Vocabulary embedded in game narrative
Motivational type	Primarily extrinsic	Primarily intrinsic
Learner role	Task performer	Player / agent
Vocabulary encounter	Deliberate, decontextualized	Incidental or semi-incident, contextualized
Technology dependency	Moderate to high	Moderate to very high
Examples	Duolingo, Quizlet, Kahoot!	Minecraft EDU, RPG vocabulary games

The reviewed studies consistently highlighted motivation as the central functional difference between the two approaches. Gamification, in alignment with operant conditioning principles and external motivation theories (Skinner, 1938; Deci & Ryan, 2000), produces engagement through reward structures. Points, badges, and leaderboards trigger dopaminergic reward responses and encourage repeated interaction with

vocabulary material. However, numerous studies warned of *gamification fatigue* – a phenomenon wherein the novelty of rewards diminishes over time, reducing sustained engagement (Hanus & Fox, 2015; Yuldoshev, 2024). GBL, by contrast, was more consistently aligned with Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Games that provide learners with autonomy, a sense of competence, and social relatedness support intrinsic motivation and more durable engagement with vocabulary. When learners encounter new words while solving a narrative puzzle or negotiating in a simulated marketplace, the contextual richness and affective investment are greater than in point-driven drill exercises (Mayer, 2019).

Studies employing gamified approaches generally reported significant short-term gains in vocabulary form recognition, spelling accuracy, and word frequency recall. Quizlet-based experiments, for instance, showed improved performance on immediate post-tests across multiple EFL contexts (Loewen et al., 2019). However, retention at delayed post-tests (4–8 weeks) was less consistently positive. GBL studies, while fewer and methodologically more varied, reported stronger gains in contextual vocabulary use, collocation knowledge, and pragmatic appropriateness of target words. Learners in GBL conditions were more likely to demonstrate receptive-to-productive transfer of vocabulary, suggesting deeper processing had occurred (Plass, Homer, & Kinzer, 2015). This aligns with the Involvement Load Hypothesis (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001), which predicts that higher cognitive involvement during word encounter produces stronger retention.

Gamification was more frequently implemented in large, heterogeneous EFL classrooms due to its scalability and ease of deployment. GBL, while pedagogically more powerful in several respects, posed greater challenges in terms of time investment, technology access, teacher training, and curricular alignment. Studies from Uzbekistan and similar EFL contexts noted that while gamified platforms are increasingly accessible, full GBL implementations remain limited in under-resourced educational settings (Yuldoshev, 2024; Shortt et al., 2021).

Discussion. The conflation of gamification and GBL in research and practice carries concrete consequences. When a teacher believes they are implementing GBL by adding a points system to a vocabulary quiz, they may conclude – after modest results – that “game-based approaches” are ineffective. Conversely, when a researcher reports GBL outcomes but has in fact studied a gamified platform, the findings may overstate or misrepresent the mechanisms responsible for vocabulary gains. Clarifying the distinction enables more precise research designs, more informative meta-analyses, and more deliberate pedagogical choices. As Kapp (2012) argued, the distinction ultimately lies in the relationship between the game logic and the learning content: in gamification, content precedes game; in GBL, game and content are co-constitutive.

This review does not suggest that one approach is superior to the other in all contexts. Rather, the findings support a complementary view. Gamification may be particularly

well-suited to vocabulary review, fluency development, and motivation maintenance in contexts where intrinsic motivation is low or where large-scale deployment is necessary. GBL may be more appropriate when the instructional goal involves deep word knowledge, pragmatic competence, or the integration of lexical and communicative skills.

In EFL classrooms with limited resources or time, gamification may serve as a practical entry point. In settings where technology access, teacher expertise, and curricular flexibility allow, GBL offers a richer vocabulary learning environment. The ideal scenario may combine both: a gamified scaffolding layer that sustains motivation while GBL episodes drive depth of processing at key curricular moments.

Educators and curriculum designers selecting vocabulary tools should be guided by clear pedagogical intentions. A platform such as Quizlet Live, which gamifies flashcard review, is appropriate for recognition-level vocabulary consolidation. A simulation-based role-play game, by contrast, may be more suitable for teaching collocations, pragmatic register, or academic vocabulary in discipline-specific contexts. The selection process must begin with a learning objective, not a technology preference.

This review is limited by the heterogeneity of included studies in terms of proficiency level, learner age, vocabulary targets, and research designs. Quantitative synthesis across such varied studies would risk validity. Furthermore, the relative scarcity of high-quality, longitudinal GBL studies in EFL contexts limits the strength of claims about long-term vocabulary outcomes.

Conclusion. This article has systematically examined the theoretical and practical distinction between gamification and game-based learning in vocabulary instruction. The analysis reveals that while both approaches draw on game-related concepts to enhance vocabulary learning, they differ fundamentally in their design logic, motivational mechanisms, and anticipated learning outcomes.

Gamification adds game elements – principally extrinsic motivators – to existing vocabulary tasks. GBL immerses learners in game environments where vocabulary is encountered through meaningful, goal-directed interaction. Each approach has specific strengths and limitations, and their effectiveness is shaped significantly by context, instructional goals, and available resources. For EFL/ESL educators, the practical takeaway is clear: vocabulary pedagogy should be built on explicit, theoretically grounded choices. Labeling a point-based quiz as “game-based learning” obscures its actual mechanisms and misrepresents the evidence base. By distinguishing clearly between these approaches, practitioners can make better-informed decisions, and researchers can produce more cumulative, rigorous knowledge about what works, for whom, and why in the vocabulary classroom. Future research should address the long-term retention effects of each approach across diverse EFL contexts, the role of cultural factors in shaping learner response to gamified and game-based mechanics, and the potential synergies when the two approaches are integrated within a unified curriculum design.

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