



# CONQUERING THE GOLDEN FIELDS: EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF MIXED AND NON-DIGITAL GAMIFICATION IN AN EFL CLASSROOM

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## *Abstract*

This study presents the year-long implementation of a structured, mixed and non-digital gamification-based teaching practice conducted by an experienced primary school English teacher. The 72-lesson program was designed within a participatory action research framework to sustain learner motivation, promote self-regulated learning, and enhance engagement. As a fundamental component of human culture, play holds significant potential in education (Machová et al., 2019). The gamified curriculum integrated level progression, point collection, narrative structures, choice-based activities, and continuous learner feedback. Findings indicate improved classroom participation, attentiveness, and language skill development. Although the theoretical background of gamification is well-established internationally, empirical research in primary education remains limited (Caponetto et al., 2014; Fridrich, 2023). This study contributes a practice-based model to support the conscious and sustainable integration of gamification into everyday teaching practice.

**Keywords:** *gamification; primary education; English as a foreign language; action research; classroom practice*

## **1. Introduction**

*“Among the questions concerning children, perhaps nothing is so close to the human eye as children’s play. For where there are children, there is play, for a child is unthinkable without play. Inside the nursery, outside in the open field, even in hospitals, on dusty village streets, and among the great stone palaces of the great cities that connect earth, sky, and air—even beside the morgues laden with somber grief—the child still plays” (Nógrády, 1912:12).*

The quotation was first published more than a century ago in the Hungarian scholarly volume *The Child and Play*, a work that has since inspired many academic and public inquiries. This lasting interest highlights the undeniable significance of play, which serves as a cornerstone not only of child development but also of the broader evolution of humankind (Machová et al., 2019). Although both theoretical and practical interests of pedagogical play have grown considerably over the past century, there is still a need for systematic and evidence-based research to help education and classroom practice fully integrate play and gamification into today’s dynamic learning environments. As Fridrich (2023) points out, the renewed emphasis on play-based teaching and learning, supported by digital and ICT tools, has opened new directions in twenty-first-century education. However, international research continues to reveal a tension between the goals of teacher education, curriculum expectations, and the actual needs of learners, a mismatch that can reduce the effectiveness of teaching and learning. Where

these three areas meet, complex challenges arise in everyday pedagogy, highlighting the importance of alignment in teaching methods, curriculum design, and student needs (Höfrová et al., 2024). Building upon this understanding, gamification offers a promising pedagogical pathway for incorporating interactivity, challenge, and enjoyment into the learning process, incorporating elements such as points, badges, leaderboards, challenges, and educational duels to foster sustained learner engagement and improved outcomes (Gazdag et al., 2025). To examine these dynamics in greater depth, the present study investigates the impact of mixed and non-digital structured classroom gamification in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction through the methodology of participatory action research (PAR). Implemented over the course of one academic year, the research covered 72 lessons with a cohort of 11 sixth-grade students. The iterative PAR design enabled continuous reflection, collaborative inquiry, and adaptive intervention involving the teacher-researcher, participating students, and colleagues, ensuring that pedagogical modifications and innovations emerged organically from the shared classroom experience.

## 2. Conceptual Framework of Gamification

The concept of *gamification* was first introduced by Nick Pelling in 2002 to describe the process of making digital interactions faster and more enjoyable through game-like user interfaces (Marczewski, 2021). Although it was invented in the early 2000s, the term gained widespread attention only in the late 2010s (Deterding et al., 2011; Machová, 2019; Werbach, 2014). Despite its popularity, no single definition of gamification has been universally accepted. Deterding et al. (2011, cited in Fridrich, 2023) define it as *the use of game design elements in non-game contexts to enhance motivation and competence*, while Machová (2019) and Richter et al. (2015, cited in Kálmán et al., 2023) emphasize its role *in making traditional processes more engaging and effective*. Marczewski (2021) identifies three common attributes shared across various definitions of gamification: a game-based framework, playful elements, and immersive experiences. While these features characterize gamification, they can also be found in *game-based learning* and *didactic games*. Therefore, it is essential to distinguish between these related yet pedagogically distinct concepts. According to Al-Azawi et al. (2016), game-based learning employs actual games as instructional tools, enabling learners to acquire knowledge and skills through authentic play experiences. Didactic games, in contrast, are designed around specific educational objectives, with the game format serving primarily to reinforce content. Gamification, however, integrates selected game mechanics, such as points, badges, challenges, or leaderboards into non-game contexts to enhance motivation and engagement without transforming the activity itself into a game (Chang et al., 2012; Dahalan et al., 2023; Kirchner-Krath et al., 2021). To adapt the concept of gamification to everyday teaching practice, it involves the deliberate application of game-design principles to educational processes in order to evoke the sense of play without transforming learning into an actual game. Its effectiveness depends on purposeful instructional design that aligns learners' needs with clearly defined objectives and meaningful activities (Huang & Soman, 2013, cited in Figueroa-Flores, 2016).

### 2.1. Pedagogical and Motivational Foundations of Gamified Learning

Frommann (2016) identifies three essential components of successful gamification: *optimal leveling, a consistent reward system, and balanced cognitive load*. Together, these elements establish a motivating framework that sustains learners' engagement while ensuring that the level of challenge remains both appropriate and stimulating. Optimal leveling involves structuring learning goals around a chief narrative or purpose that motivates learners and connects smaller objectives into a coherent whole. The reward system functions through immediate and proportional feedback, reinforcing each accomplishment and maintaining learners' sense of progress. Balanced cognitive load ensures that the complexity of tasks aligns with students' abilities, creating balance between easily achievable activities that build confidence and more demanding challenges that foster growth. When effectively combined, these principles prevent boredom and frustration while promoting a continuous, meaningful learning experience (Frommann, 2016; Huang & Soman, 2013, cited in Figueroa-Flores, 2016).

### 2.1.2. Gamification in EFL Education

Digital games have been prominent in research on teaching and learning for nearly two decades (Bogost, 2011; Gee, 2007), yet studies that focus specifically on primary education remain significantly underrepresented. A systematic review of more than 120 studies by Caponetto et al. (2014) revealed that, despite the widespread adoption of PBL systems, only about 3% of the research addressed this population. A similar pattern was identified by Zahang (2023) and by Fridrich (2023), who observed that approximately 75% of the international literature on gamification approaches the topic from a theoretical standpoint, with only 30–40% analysing concrete pedagogical processes, most of which focus on higher education and adult learning. Consequently, the lower levels of compulsory education remain largely unexplored. Extending these findings, a systematic literature review conducted by Gazdag et al. (2025) identified only seven empirical studies within the EBSCO and JSTOR databases that examined the use of gamification in primary-level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, further underscoring the scarcity of research in this educational context. The review by Gazdag revealed that gamification was most frequently applied to enhance reading, writing, speaking, and vocabulary development, while simultaneously strengthening learner motivation and classroom engagement. Across the studies, game elements such as points, badges, leaderboards, quizzes, and digital avatars (Homer et al., 2018; Li et al., 2021; Konstantakis, 2022) were shown to promote active participation, sustain attention, and foster a positive attitude toward learning. The studies analyzed in the systematic review consistently emphasized that gamified learning environments carry multiple pedagogical benefits. First, game elements such as points, badges, and leaderboards were found to increase learner motivation, encouraging task completion and greater classroom participation (Homer et al., 2018; Li et al., 2021; Konstantakis, 2022; Casanova-Mata, 2023). Second, gamification was shown to enhance learner engagement and self-regulated learning, as playful elements maintained attention, made learning more enjoyable, and led to improved learning attitudes and outcomes (Homer et al., 2018; Li et al., 2021; Konstantakis, 2022; Torres-Rodríguez, 2022; Casanova-Mata, 2023). Third, compared with control groups, students often demonstrated improved performance in reading, writing, vocabulary acquisition, and problem-solving, even if, in some cases, these gains were not statistically significant (Casanova-Mata, 2023). Finally, gamification was found to support the development of 21st-century competencies, including critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, and effective communication (Konstantakis, 2022; Torres-Rodríguez, 2022). Overall, the studies included in the synthesis viewed gamification as a promising instructional approach in primary EFL classrooms, as it fosters motivation, engagement, and the development of linguistic and social skills. However, the authors unanimously stressed the need for further empirical and longitudinal research to better understand the long-term effects and sustainability of gamified learning practices (Gazdag et al., 2024) which inspired the present research.

## 3. Research Aim and Objectives

Recent international research indicates a widening gap between the focus of teacher education, the expectations set by curricula, and what learners genuinely need, an imbalance that may hinder effective teaching in the classroom (Höfrová et al., 2024). As a result, teachers are increasingly looking for approaches that help them engage students more deeply, maintain motivation, and create meaningful learning experiences. Participatory action research (PAR) offers a suitable framework for this effort: it supports the continuous improvement of teaching, encourages the testing of new methods, and promotes reflection, collaboration, and professional development (Havas, 2004; Vámos et al., 2012; Vámos, 2013; Vámos et al., 2015; Zank, 2022). Within this framework, classroom-based action research is well suited for exploring the use of pedagogical gamification, especially because practical applications of gamified teaching particularly in primary education remain limited. The present study responds to this need by examining how mixed and non-digital gamification strategies influence learner engagement, motivation, and language development in EFL classrooms through the framework of participatory action research. To achieve this aim, the study includes the design and implementation of hybrid and non-digital gamified activities, the systematic observation and analysis of students' behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement, and the documentation of reflective learning processes among both students and teacher(s). These efforts are guided by the following research question: *How can gamified teaching practices help reduce the gap between students' technological learning needs and teachers' professional readiness, while supporting reflection and ongoing professional development?*

### 3.1. Context and Participants

Pedagogical action research successfully joins objectives, methods, and outcomes, creating unity among individual learning, research, development, and innovation (Vámos, 2013). In this study, the pedagogical intervention unfolds across multiple cycles, each combining elements of non-digital and mixed gamification and refined through continuous reflection based on observed outcomes. Within this framework, the conducted participatory action research aimed to explore how the adaptation of hybrid gamification implemented over one academic year (72 teaching hours) in a sixth-grade class ( $n = 11$ ) of a Serbian elementary school contributed to narrowing the gap between students' technological learning demands and teachers' professional readiness. Furthermore, the study examined how this process fostered pedagogical reflection, strengthened professional collaboration, and supported the continuous professional development of the teacher-researcher.

### 3.2. Data Collection Methods

Data collection throughout the participatory action research design drew on multiple sources to obtain both instructional practices and learner experiences. Classroom observations were conducted by colleagues and were accompanied by field notes and post-lesson discussions using a think-aloud reflective protocol. The teacher-researcher's reflective diary further documented pedagogical decisions and professional reflections throughout the process. To capture learners' perspectives, student reflection sheets were collected across the intervention. In addition, pre- and post-tests of language skills, together with motivation scales (adaptation of N. Kollár et al., 2001.), were administered to assess changes in linguistic development and learner engagement over the course of the study.

#### 3.2.1. In-between gamification storyline

As the school is located in a rural agricultural region of Northern Serbia, students collaboratively created a storyline for the *in-between* (hybrid or semi-content) gamification process. Through the intervention, the curricular content remained unchanged, but the framing, context, and delivery were enriched with a narrative layer. This form of gamification combined structural elements such as points and leaderboards while connected them to a main story. The resulting narrative, titled "*The Conquest of the Golden Fields*," provided a familiar and motivating thematic frame. Students were welcomed into *Agraria's golden land*, where their mission was to build an agricultural empire. Their quest involved earning points, purchasing estates, and acquiring powerful tractors to cultivate their land. Through persistence, regular effort, and strategic planning, learners could advance within the narrative to become the master of the prosperous fields. Within the gamified narrative framework, students collected points according to the predefined scoring system, which was administered through the ClassDojo online PBL platform.

**Table 1.** *The collaboratively predefined scoring system*

Mission step	Activity / Challenge	Points & rewards	
1. Collect Points & Resources	Submit homework on time	+2 pts each	
	Be attentive & respectful in class	+1–3 pts per 15 min	
	Be active during lessons	+1–3 pts per 15 min	
	Quick diagnostic quiz (3–5 min)	+1–3 pts	
	Grades → Points conversion:		
Grade 5 (A)	Test 10 pts • Exam 15 pts • Oral 10 pts		
Grade 4 (B)	Test 8 pts • Exam 12 pts • Oral 8 pts		
Grade 3 (C)	Test 6 pts • Exam 9 pts • Oral 6 pts		
Grade 2 (D)	Test 4 pts • Exam 6 pts • Oral 4 pts		
Grade 1 (E)	Test 2 pts • Exam 3 pts • Oral 2 pts		
2. Buy Fields & Tractors	Purchase land (1 acre)	20 pts	
	IMT 533 Basic Tractor	50 pts – improves efficiency	
	John Deere 7R 330 Mid-level Tractor	75 pts ( or IMT + 25 ) – adds bonuses	
	Golden Raba-Steiger 250 Tractor – Dream Model	100 pts – maximum performance	
3. Differentiated Tasks by Tractor Level			
	Basic Tractor	Simple tasks – vocabulary, basic sentences	Guided support, visuals, more time
	Mid-Level Tractor	Medium tasks – dialogues, short texts	Moderate help, mixed-ability groups
	Golden Tractor	Complex tasks – presentations, essays, projects	Independent work, time limits, peer feedback

4. Tractor Bonuses		
Basic Tractor	+2 pts per duel win • Helper cards • Instant feedback	
Mid-Level Tractor	+5 pts per duel • Tactical cards • 5 min teacher consult • Group challenges	
Golden Tractor	+10 pts per duel • Special powers • Mentor sessions • Own project • Certificates	
5. Duel Challenges (“Farm Battles”)	Vocabulary duel	+5 / –5 pts
	Grammar duel	+5 / –5 pts
	Pronunciation duel	+5 / –5 pts
	Writing duel	+10 / –5 pts
	Quiz duel	+10 / –5 pts
Special Tractor Duels	Complex Grammar Duel	+15 / –10 pts
	Creative Writing Duel	+20 / –10 pts
	Oral Presentation Duel	+20 / –10 pts

## 4. Findings and Discussion

The gamified EFL framework, *Conquest of the Golden Fields*, goes beyond simple classroom motivation by creating an immersive learning environment in which students take an active role in their own progress. The farming metaphor, which built on earning land, upgrading tractors, and “cultivating” knowledge gave learning goals a relatable meaning. Moreover, with constant goal-setting and visible progress, students felt ownership for their learning, that traditional grading systems fail to provide. The combination of point collection, challenges, and duels transformed routine tasks into dynamic missions that encouraged teamwork, friendly competition, and persistence. The tractor system supported differentiation: beginning learners received additional structure and guidance, while more advanced students were encouraged to pursue higher levels of independence and creativity.

As reflected in the teacher-researcher’s diary: *When I assign points for attention and participation, I want students to see them as feedback, not just rewards. The idea is that effort and consistency lead to progress... just like cultivating land with their tractors. (...) The tractor system: basic, medium, and gold helps me differentiate tasks. Stronger learners can aim for ‘gold tractors,’ while others still move forward with simpler activities. This keeps everyone motivated without creating pressure.*

### 4.1 Effects on Learner Engagement and Motivation

The implementation of the *Conquest of the Golden Fields* gamified framework showed positive outcomes both in terms of student engagement and broader educational development. Beyond measurable linguistic growth, the model supported many essential twenty-first-century skills such as collaboration, self-regulated learning and strategic thinking. Students did not only acquire new language competencies but also learned how to set goals, monitor their progress, and take responsibility for their individual learning. One can conclude that, the framework transformed language acquisition into a meaningful and enjoyable adventure, that values progress, effort and academic achievements. Results from the preliminary study indicated that the gamified instructional approach was highly accepted by the vast majority of participating students. A significant percentage 90.9% reported that they enjoyed the gamified lessons. This number suggests that the learning environment could effectively support engagement and the teacher-researcher as a facilitator could positively influence student attitudes. Only 9.1% expressed dislike toward the approach, showing minimal resistance.

The findings regarding motivation present a more complex picture. The majority of students (72.7%) stated that they would be more willing to prepare if rewards were attached to tasks. This reveals the persistent relevance of extrinsic motivators, particularly for younger learners, and shows that reward structures embedded in the gamified environment can meaningfully shape effort and participation. At the same time, a smaller subgroup (27.3%) reported that rewards would not influence their preparation habits. This response may indicate stronger intrinsic motivation, greater autonomy, or more established self-regulatory strategies, highlighting that not all learners rely on external rewards to engage fully.

**Table 2.** *Results from the preliminary study*

Category	Number of Students	Interpretation
<b>Positive attitude toward gamification</b>	10 students (90.9%)	The high level of acceptance indicates that the gamified learning environment was well received and that the teacher's instructional approach positively influenced learner engagement and attitudes.
<b>Negative attitude toward gamification</b>	1 student (9.1%)	The low proportion of negative responses suggests minimal resistance to the approach and reflects the successful alignment of the gamified system with students' developmental needs and interests.
<b>Increased preparation if rewards are provided</b>	8 students (72.7%)	These responses highlight the continued relevance of extrinsic motivators for younger learners, while also indicating that the reward structure within the gamified framework can effectively enhance effort and participation.
<b>No increased preparation even with rewards</b>	3 students (27.3%)	This subgroup appears less responsive to external incentives, which may point to stronger intrinsic motivation, greater autonomy, or more established self-regulatory habits.

Overall, the findings suggest that the gamified practice contributed meaningfully to classroom engagement and learning processes. The high levels of student acceptance indicate that the framework not only increased participation but also supported learner motivation across the intervention. The findings emphasize the potentials of gamification in creating a more dynamic, positive, and learner-centered classroom climate. The data further highlights how gamification can strengthen student engagement while simultaneously supporting the teacher's reflective decision-making and professional growth. Preliminary observations reveal positive effects on key areas of language development, most notably vocabulary enrichment, oral fluency, and communicative confidence. Students demonstrated greater willingness to participate in spoken tasks and recalled target vocabulary more effectively over time. Additionally, the combination of mixed and non-digital gamification elements, such as narrative framing, physical reward systems, and digital point tracking, may have complementary benefits, reinforcing both intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of language learning.

#### 4.2 Teacher Reflection and Pedagogical Change

Teacher-researcher reflections, recorded across multiple PAR cycles, indicate that the gamified framework facilitated ongoing pedagogical experimentation and professional growth. The supplementary reflective journals showed the various cycles in which the teacher gradually refined the intervention to better meet students' needs, while she was also adjusting task difficulty and reward structures.

### 5. Limitations and Future Research

The present study is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. First, the research was conducted with a small-scale sample drawn from a single classroom. The vastly contextualized nature of the invention means that the outcomes may not represent different institutional contexts. Furthermore, the study was carried out over a shorter period, offering only initial preliminary findings of the gamified framework. To obtain a deeper understanding of its long-term impact on learner motivation, classroom participation, and language development, longitudinal research designs are needed. Future research involving multiple teachers with similar institutional backgrounds and access to comparable technical facilities would be desirable. These directions for future inquiry offer pathways toward refining the pedagogical intervention and better understanding to its applicability across varied educational contexts.

## 6. Conclusion

This preliminary study concluded that a gamified instructional approach, embedded within a participatory action research framework, can meaningfully enhance both student engagement and teacher development. The findings show that gamification increased learners' motivation, strengthened classroom participation, and contributed to a more positive and dynamic learning environment. At the same time, the iterative cycles of action research enabled the teacher-researcher to make informed pedagogical adjustments, reflect critically on practice, and gradually refine the gamified model. This study was designed to respond to that challenge and was guided by the question: **How can gamified teaching practices help reduce the gap between students' technological learning needs and teachers' professional readiness, while supporting reflection and ongoing professional development?** The results suggest that a carefully planned gamified framework can serve as a viable pathway for addressing this question. Gamification offered students meaningful encouragements to participate, while action research supported the teacher in developing context-sensitive strategies, enhancing technological readiness, and implementing innovation in a sustainable manner. Overall, the combined use of gamification and participatory action research appears to provide a promising model for bridging emerging competence gaps in the digital era. It positions teachers not only as facilitators of engaging learning experiences but also as reflective practitioners capable of aligning instructional practices with the evolving needs of their learners.

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