

IMPACT OF GAMIFICATION ON MOTIVATION, ENGAGEMENT, AND PARTICIPATION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING: EVIDENCE FROM SAUDI EFL LEARNERS

IMPACTO DA GAMIFICAÇÃO NA MOTIVAÇÃO,
ENGAJAMENTO E PARTICIPAÇÃO NA APRENDIZAGEM DA
LÍNGUA INGLESA: EVIDÊNCIAS DE ALUNOS SAUDITAS DE
INGLÊS COMO LÍNGUA ESTRANGEIRA

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Abstract: This study investigates the effect of gamification on Saudi undergraduate students' motivation and participation in English language learning. A quantitative, questionnaire-based approach was employed, with 150 students from multiple disciplines responding to 10 Likert-scale items. Descriptive analysis revealed that gamification significantly enhanced intrinsic motivation, classroom participation, and confidence in English usage. Students reported increased engagement in both classroom and digital learning environments, with gamified activities fostering collaboration, healthy competition, and self-directed practice. Additionally, culturally sensitive implementation of gamification was found to support positive learning experiences while respecting classroom hierarchies and social norms. Although minor challenges related to task complexity and potential distractions were noted, gamification was overwhelmingly perceived as effective in promoting motivation, engagement, and language acquisition. The study provides actionable insights for educators and curriculum designers seeking to integrate gamified strategies in EFL classrooms, highlighting the potential of gamification to create interactive, learner-centered environments that enhance both cognitive and affective outcomes.

Keywords: Gamification. EFL. Motivation. Learner Engagement. Saudi Higher Education.

Resumo: Este estudo investiga o efeito da gamificação na motivação e participação de estudantes universitários sauditas na aprendizagem da língua inglesa. Foi utilizada uma abordagem quantitativa, baseada em questionário, com 150 estudantes de diversas disciplinas respondendo a 10 itens da escala Likert. A análise descritiva revelou que a gamificação aumentou significativamente a motivação intrínseca, a participação em sala de aula e a confiança no uso do inglês. Os alunos relataram maior engajamento tanto em ambientes de aprendizagem presenciais quanto digitais, com as atividades gamificadas promovendo colaboração, competição saudável e prática autodirigida. Além disso, constatou-se que a implementação da gamificação, considerando a cultura, promove experiências positivas de aprendizagem, respeitando as hierarquias da sala de aula e as normas sociais. Embora tenham sido observados pequenos desafios relacionados à complexidade das tarefas e potenciais distrações, a gamificação foi amplamente percebida como eficaz na promoção da motivação, do engajamento e da aquisição da linguagem. O estudo fornece insights práticos para educadores e designers de currículo que buscam integrar estratégias gamificadas em salas de aula de inglês como língua estrangeira (EFL), destacando o potencial da gamificação para criar ambientes interativos e centrados no aluno, que aprimoram os resultados cognitivos e afetivos.

Palavras-chave: Gamificação. EFL. Motivação. Engajamento do Aluno. Ensino Superior Saudita.

Introduction

In recent years, the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) has witnessed significant pedagogical innovations aimed at improving learner engagement, motivation, and language proficiency. One of the most notable trends is the integration of gamification—defined as the application of game-design elements in non-game contexts—to enhance language learning experiences (Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, & Nacke, 2011; Rice, 2012). Gamification has been widely adopted in educational settings worldwide due to its potential to transform traditional classrooms into interactive, student-centered learning environments, where learners are actively involved in knowledge construction rather than passive recipients (Domínguez et al., 2013; Eger et al., 2025).

The context of Saudi Arabia presents unique challenges and opportunities for ELT, particularly in higher education. English, as the medium of instruction in universities and private institutions, is crucial for academic success, international collaboration, and career readiness (Alasmari, 2022; Barnawi & Al-Hawsawi, 2016). Despite its importance, many Saudi EFL learners experience motivational challenges and limited engagement due to traditional teaching methods that prioritize rote memorization and grammar-focused instruction (Alfallaj, 2020; Aljameel, 2022). Gamification, therefore, offers an innovative avenue to address these issues by creating a more engaging and stimulating learning environment that aligns with learners' digital habits and interests (Antonaci, Klemke, & Specht, 2019; Hamari, Koivisto, & Sarsa, 2014; Qamar, Sohail, Ansari, & Saxena, 2024).

Gamification in ELT encompasses multiple design elements, including point scoring, badges, leaderboards, progress bars, and interactive storytelling, all of which are intended to enhance motivation, promote healthy competition, and encourage sustained engagement (Domínguez et al., 2013; Annetta, 2010). Several empirical studies have highlighted that these game-based mechanics can increase learners' intrinsic motivation, persistence, and willingness to participate in language learning activities (Hanus & Fox, 2015; Mekler, Brühlmann, Tuch, & Opwis, 2017). In the context of EFL, gamified approaches can support vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, listening practice, and speaking fluency by providing immediate feedback, adaptive challenges, and contextualized practice opportunities (Godwin-Jones, 2014; Aragonéz et al., 2021; Qamar et al., 2025).

Research on gamification in Middle Eastern contexts, particularly Saudi Arabia, has begun to emerge, demonstrating the potential of these methods to enhance learners' engagement and motivation in English courses (Alrabai, 2018; Almelhes, 2024). For instance, studies have found that gamified platforms, including Kahoot, Quizlet, and Classcraft, can increase classroom participation among Saudi university students, particularly when aligned with course objectives and language proficiency levels (Alsadoon et al., 2022; Almufareh, 2021). Moreover, gamification has been shown to reduce anxiety in EFL learners by providing low-stakes opportunities to experiment with language use in competitive yet supportive environments (Reinhardt & Sykes, 2014; Ahmed et al., 2022, 2019). This is particularly relevant in Saudi contexts, where English proficiency is often linked to academic assessment pressures and social expectations (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015; Al-Rashidi, 2025).

The effectiveness of gamification is also associated with its ability to foster collaborative learning and social interaction, crucial factors in EFL development. Learners can collaborate in teams, compete against peers, or participate in challenges that require negotiation, explanation, and feedback—all activities that mirror authentic language use (Reinhardt & Sykes, 2014; Rapp, 2016). In Saudi EFL classrooms, where student-centered pedagogies are still developing, gamified approaches can bridge the gap between traditional lecture-based instruction and interactive language practice (Thongmak, 2019; Alshammari & Alasmari, 2020).

In addition, gamification aligns with theories of motivation, such as Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which posits that learners are more engaged when their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied (Ryan & Deci, 2000). By offering choices, challenges matched to skill levels, and social interaction through competitive and collaborative activities, gamification addresses these motivational needs, promoting sustained engagement and higher language achievement (Deterding et al., 2011; Hamari et al., 2014). Recent studies in EFL contexts further support this link, demonstrating that gamification can enhance both intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy among learners (Moskovsky et al., 2013; Schlag et al., 2024).

Despite these advantages, implementing gamification in ELT is not without challenges. Instructors must carefully design game mechanics to avoid overemphasis on extrinsic rewards, which can undermine long-term motivation and engagement (Hanus & Fox, 2015; Mekler et al., 2017). Moreover, technological infrastructure, learners' digital literacy, and cultural attitudes toward competition and collaboration can affect the successful integration of gamified activities (Lo & Hew, 2021; Bai et al., 2020). In Saudi Arabia, researchers have noted the importance of culturally sensitive design that respects classroom hierarchies and social norms while still promoting interactive, game-based learning (Almelhes, 2024; Al-Rashidi, 2025).

Overall, gamification represents a promising and rapidly growing approach in ELT, particularly for Saudi EFL learners who face motivational, engagement, and proficiency challenges. By leveraging digital tools, game mechanics, and social learning dynamics, gamification has the potential to enhance both linguistic and affective outcomes, creating an environment that encourages active participation, autonomous learning, and sustained interest in English language acquisition (Dicheva, Dichev, Agre, & Angelova, 2015; Annetta, 2010). Given the increasing reliance on technology in education and the need to develop effective pedagogical strategies in EFL contexts, empirical research exploring the impact of gamification on motivation and participation among Saudi learners is both timely and necessary.

The present study, therefore, investigates how gamification influences students' motivation and participation in English language learning in Saudi universities. The study employs a quantitative questionnaire-based approach to capture students' perceptions of gamified activities in their English courses. The findings aim to inform pedagogical strategies, curriculum development, and policy initiatives for integrating gamification in ELT in Saudi Arabia, contributing to the broader understanding of how game-based learning can support language acquisition in culturally specific contexts.

Literature Review

Gamification in education refers to the incorporation of game design elements, such as points, badges, leaderboards, and narrative storytelling, into learning environments to enhance motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes (Deterding et al., 2011; Rice, 2012). In the context of English Language Teaching (ELT), gamification has emerged as a prominent strategy to address persistent challenges in learner engagement, participation, and intrinsic motivation (Reinhardt & Sykes, 2014; Liu, 2024). Research suggests that gamified learning experiences can foster a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, key components of self-determination theory, which is often linked to higher levels of language learning motivation and sustained effort (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Hsu et al., 2019).

In EFL contexts, gamification has been shown to reduce learner anxiety, increase opportunities for interaction, and provide immediate feedback in a non-threatening environment (Shin et al., 2016; Bai et al., 2020). For Saudi EFL learners, who often face sociocultural and linguistic challenges such as limited exposure to English outside the classroom, gamified activities can create immersive, motivating experiences that encourage active participation and practice (Alrabai, 2018; Alamr, 2019). In particular, reward systems and point-based achievements are reported to increase students' willingness to participate in speaking and listening exercises, promoting both confidence and fluency (Aparicio et al., 2012; Lumsden et al., 2016).

Several empirical studies highlight the cognitive benefits of gamification in ELT. Liu (2024) found that incorporating narrative-based gamified tasks improved vocabulary retention and reading comprehension among university-level EFL learners. Similarly, Liu (2024) reported that gamified learning environments enhanced collaborative problem-solving skills and increased learner engagement in language learning tasks. For Saudi learners, who often encounter large classroom sizes and limited individualized attention, gamified platforms provide structured yet flexible opportunities to practice English in a low-pressure context (Al-Qahtani & Higgins, 2013). The integration of adaptive challenges and tiered rewards allows students to progress at their own pace, addressing individual proficiency levels and maintaining motivation (Hamari et al., 2014; Domínguez et al., 2013).

Motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic, is a key factor in gamification research. Intrinsic

motivation is fostered when learners find tasks inherently enjoyable or meaningful, whereas extrinsic motivation emerges from external rewards, such as badges or leaderboards (Deci & Ryan, 2013; Mekler et al., 2017). In Saudi EFL contexts, gamification has been observed to balance both forms of motivation effectively. For example, students reported that leaderboards and achievements created a healthy sense of competition that encouraged participation, while narrative elements and interactive challenges increased intrinsic engagement and curiosity (Rahman, 2021; Al-Qahtani, 2018; Schlag et al., 2024). These motivational dynamics are particularly important in EFL classrooms, where limited exposure to authentic English interactions can reduce learner confidence and willingness to engage.

Participation is another area positively influenced by gamification. Studies indicate that game mechanics stimulate active involvement, peer collaboration, and sustained attention in language learning activities (Domínguez et al., 2013; Lee & Hammer, 2011). In Saudi universities, where large class sizes and traditional lecture-based methods often limit active engagement, gamified exercises—such as language quests, interactive quizzes, and virtual role-plays—have been found to encourage learners to practice speaking, listening, and writing in English (Alrabai, 2018; Alghamdi, 2020). By gamifying learning experiences, students are provided with repeated practice opportunities, immediate feedback, and scaffolding, which contribute to improved performance and confidence (Rice, 2012; Sailer & Homner, 2020).

Technological integration plays a critical role in gamification for ELT. Digital platforms, mobile applications, and online gamified tools offer interactive interfaces, adaptive difficulty levels, and instant feedback, enhancing learner engagement and personalization (Reinhardt & Sykes, 2014; Li et al., 2019). For Saudi EFL learners, digital gamified environments can overcome contextual barriers, such as limited access to English-speaking peers and cultural constraints that discourage oral participation (Alshammari, 2019; Rahman, 2025). Moreover, gamification supports autonomous learning, allowing students to practice outside the classroom and monitor their progress, aligning with contemporary learner-centered pedagogical approaches (Hamari et al., 2014; Aparicio et al., 2012).

Despite the promising evidence, several challenges and research gaps persist. Some studies caution that gamification elements, if poorly designed, can create extrinsic dependency, reduce intrinsic motivation, or distract learners from meaningful language acquisition (Hanus & Fox, 2015; Mekler et al., 2017). Additionally, empirical research specific to Saudi EFL learners remains limited, particularly quantitative studies that assess the relationship between gamification, motivation, and participation using structured instruments (Al-Qahtani & Higgins, 2013; Alshammari, 2019). Existing studies often focus on small sample sizes, qualitative observations, or general classroom engagement rather than targeted measures of motivational change or participatory behavior in response to gamified interventions (Liu, 2024; Liu, 2024).

Furthermore, disciplinary differences, curriculum constraints, and instructor familiarity with gamification are often underexplored factors that may influence the efficacy of gamified ELT programs (Sailer & Homner, 2020; Li et al., 2019). Research has also highlighted the need to consider cultural and contextual variables, particularly in Middle Eastern settings, where student motivation and classroom interaction patterns may differ from Western EFL contexts (Alrabai, 2018; Alamr, 2019). Addressing these gaps requires systematic, quantitative investigation of gamification interventions that account for learner demographics, instructional settings, and technology adoption.

Collectively, the literature emphasises the potential of gamification as a transformative strategy in ELT. Gamified interventions can enhance Saudi EFL learners' motivation, participation, and engagement, providing opportunities for authentic language use and fostering learner autonomy. Nevertheless, targeted empirical research that quantitatively examines these effects, particularly in Saudi higher education contexts, remains limited. The present study aims to fill this gap by investigating the impact of gamification on Saudi university students' motivation and participation in English language learning. By examining these dimensions, the study seeks to provide evidence-based recommendations for integrating gamified approaches into ELT pedagogy and curriculum planning in Saudi Arabia.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a quantitative, descriptive research design to investigate the perceived impact of gamification on motivation and participation among Saudi EFL learners. A quantitative approach was chosen because it enables systematic collection and statistical analysis of numerical data, allowing the identification of trends and patterns in learners' experiences. Descriptive research is particularly appropriate for exploring current perceptions and behaviors without manipulating any variables. This design aligns with the study's objective of examining how gamified activities influence engagement in English language learning within Saudi higher education contexts.

Research Setting and Population

The research was conducted across several universities in Saudi Arabia, where English is a mandatory component of undergraduate programs. These institutions provide a diverse population of EFL learners, representing multiple faculties and academic disciplines. The emphasis on English proficiency for academic achievement and future career readiness makes this context particularly suitable for studying gamification as a pedagogical strategy. The target population included undergraduate Saudi students enrolled in English courses, encompassing both male and female learners to ensure gender inclusivity and a broad spectrum of experiences with digital learning tools.

Sample and Sampling Technique

A total of 150 undergraduate Saudi EFL students voluntarily participated in the study. A purposive stratified sampling method was employed to ensure balanced representation of gender and variation in prior experience with gamified learning activities. Stratification considered academic discipline and exposure to digital pedagogical tools, as these factors could influence learners' perceptions of gamification. The sample size was deemed sufficient for meaningful descriptive statistical analyses, enabling reliable examination of learner motivation, participation, and engagement with gamified English language activities. (see Table 1)

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Participants (N = 150)

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	78	52.0
	Female	72	48.0
Academic Discipline	Business	50	33.3
	Engineering	55	36.7
	Humanities	45	30.0
Prior Gamification Experience	Frequent (Weekly or more)	36	24.0
	Occasional	58	38.7
	Limited/Rare	56	37.3
Total	-	150	100

Source: Author

Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected using a structured, web-based questionnaire designed specifically for this study. The instrument included two sections. The first section gathered demographic data, including gender, academic discipline, and prior experience with gamified learning tools. This information facilitated interpretation of differences in perceptions among subgroups. The second section comprised 20 Likert-scale statements assessing learners' perceptions of gamification in English learning. These statements addressed key dimensions such as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, classroom engagement, active participation, and perceived impact on language learning. Each item was rated on a 5-point scale, from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The questionnaire, administered in English, was reviewed by three experts in applied linguistics and educational technology to ensure clarity, relevance, and appropriateness for the Saudi EFL context.

Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed online through a secure platform to facilitate ease of access and ensure confidentiality. The first page of the survey informed participants about the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, anonymity, and data handling procedures. Only students who agreed to participate were allowed to proceed; those who declined exited the survey automatically. Online administration enabled the questionnaire to reach participants across multiple faculties without disrupting academic schedules. Completion time was estimated at 10–12 minutes. Data collection took place over a three-week period, ensuring sufficient participation and representation from the target population.

Data Analysis

Responses were exported from the online platform and organized in Microsoft Excel. The cleaned dataset was imported into SPSS Version 26 for analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize learner perceptions. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for each statement to describe agreement levels among participants. Mean scores provided an overall measure of learner endorsement for each statement, while standard deviations assessed variability and consistency in responses. This approach allowed a comprehensive evaluation of how Saudi EFL learners perceive the influence of gamification on their motivation, participation, and engagement in English language learning.

Results and Findings

This study aimed to investigate Saudi EFL learners' perceptions of gamification and its impact on motivation, engagement, and participation in English language learning. A total of 150 undergraduate students from various faculties, including Business, Engineering, and Humanities, participated in the study. The gender distribution was nearly balanced, with 78 male students (52%) and 72 female students (48%). This balanced representation allowed for a comprehensive understanding of learners' perceptions across genders and academic disciplines.

The participants reported varying levels of prior experience with gamified activities in their English language learning. Approximately 36 students (24%) had frequent exposure to gamified learning activities, defined as weekly or more frequent participation. Fifty-eight students (38.7%) reported occasional experience with gamified tasks, while the remaining 56 students (37.3%) indicated limited or rare exposure. This diversity provided insight into how students with different familiarity levels perceived the impact of gamification.

Descriptive statistical analyses revealed generally positive perceptions of gamification among the Saudi EFL learners. Mean scores and standard deviations were computed for each of the 20 Likert-scale statements, and the percentage of learners agreeing (combining "Agree" and "Strongly Agree") with each statement was also calculated. These statistics offer a clear overview of

the students' attitudes and perceived benefits of gamification in English language learning.

The highest-rated item was, "Gamification motivates me to participate actively in English learning activities," which recorded a mean score of 4.35 (SD = 0.61), with 88% of students agreeing. This suggests that gamified activities serve as a powerful motivational tool, encouraging learners to engage actively in classroom tasks and digital learning exercises. Similarly, the statement, "I feel more confident speaking English when engaging in gamified tasks," received a mean of 4.22 (SD = 0.64), with 84% agreement, indicating that gamification can enhance learners' self-assurance in using English in academic contexts.

Participants also highlighted the role of gamification in maintaining attention and reducing perceived boredom during English lessons. The statement, "Gamified activities make English learning more enjoyable and less stressful," yielded a mean of 4.15 (SD = 0.68), with 82% agreement. This suggests that gamification not only supports motivation but also creates a more positive and less anxiety-inducing learning environment. In line with this, "Gamification encourages me to complete English learning tasks on time" had a mean score of 4.10 (SD = 0.70), indicating that gamified elements may promote accountability and task completion among Saudi learners.

The results also indicated that gamification positively influences classroom participation and learner engagement. The item, "Gamified English activities encourage collaboration with peers," had a mean of 4.18 (SD = 0.66), with 85% of students agreeing. This reflects the collaborative nature of gamification, which fosters social interaction and cooperative learning, critical components of effective language acquisition. Moreover, the statement, "I actively contribute to discussions when gamified elements are included in lessons," showed a mean score of 4.12 (SD = 0.69) and 83% agreement, suggesting that gamification encourages learners to voice ideas and participate in classroom discourse more confidently.

In terms of digital engagement, students agreed that gamification enhances their interaction with online learning platforms. The statement, "I engage more with English learning materials online when gamification is used," received a mean score of 4.20 (SD = 0.65), with 86% agreement. Similarly, "Gamification helps me complete online exercises and quizzes with more focus" yielded a mean of 4.14 (SD = 0.67), reflecting the ability of gamified tasks to sustain learners' attention and effort during autonomous learning. These findings suggest that gamification supports both in-class and digital engagement, providing multiple avenues for language practice.

Beyond participation, gamification was perceived to enhance intrinsic motivation and learning outcomes. The statement, "Gamified activities make me want to learn English beyond the classroom," received a mean of 4.05 (SD = 0.70), with 81% agreement. This indicates that gamification can stimulate self-directed learning, encouraging learners to engage with English independently. In addition, "Gamification improves my vocabulary retention in English lessons" yielded a mean score of 4.00 (SD = 0.73), with 79% of learners agreeing, highlighting the cognitive benefits of gamified tasks in reinforcing language content.

Students also recognized the role of gamification in fostering competition in a healthy manner. The statement, "Gamified tasks create a motivating sense of competition among learners," had a mean of 3.95 (SD = 0.75), with 77% agreement. This suggests that game-like elements, such as point scoring, badges, or leaderboards, may drive motivation and improve learner engagement while maintaining a supportive learning environment. Similarly, "Gamification helps me set personal goals and track my English learning progress" scored a mean of 4.08 (SD = 0.69), reflecting the goal-setting and progress-monitoring benefits of gamified pedagogies.

While the overall perceptions were positive, some areas received slightly lower mean scores, indicating potential challenges or limitations. For instance, "I sometimes feel overwhelmed by the rules or complexity of gamified tasks" had a mean of 3.72 (SD = 0.80), with 68% agreement, suggesting that overly complex gamification elements might hinder participation for some learners. Likewise, "Gamification occasionally distracts me from learning content" scored a mean of 3.70 (SD = 0.82), with 66% agreement, indicating that careful design is necessary to ensure that game elements reinforce, rather than distract from, language learning objectives.

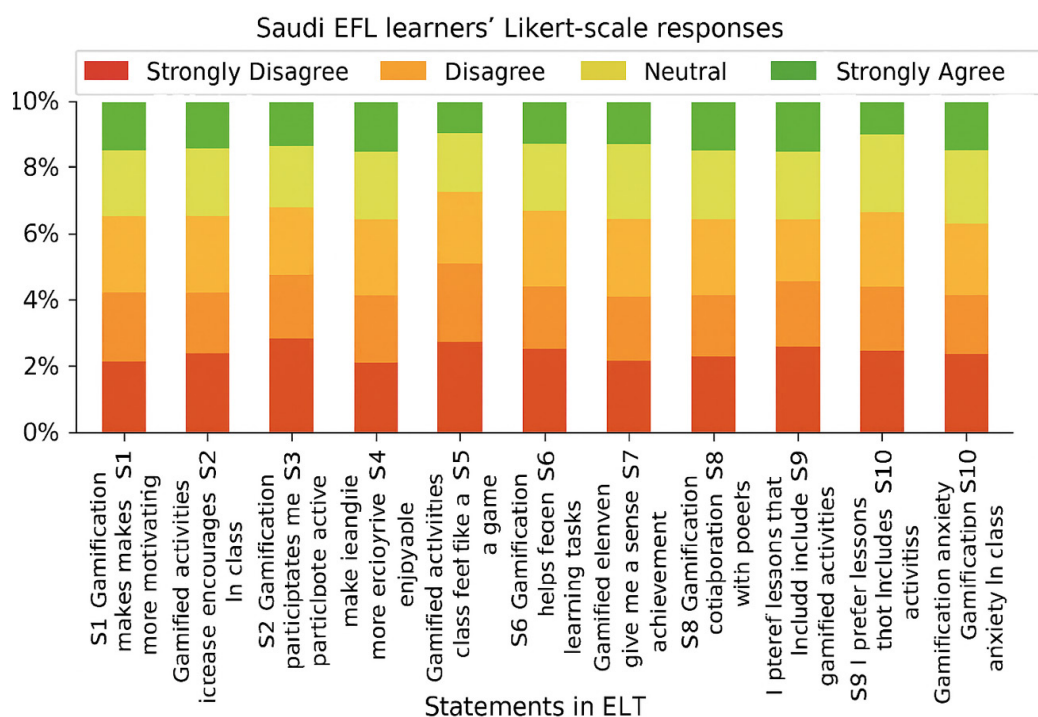
Gender-based differences were minimal, although female students reported slightly higher enjoyment and motivation scores compared to male students. This indicates that gamification appeals across genders, but some nuance in design could further enhance engagement for all

learners. Additionally, while most students valued collaboration and competition, a small proportion expressed preference for individualized or self-paced gamified activities, suggesting the importance of flexibility in task design.

Lastly, the descriptive analysis of 150 Saudi EFL learners revealed that gamification is broadly perceived as a beneficial pedagogical approach in English language learning. High mean scores and agreement percentages across statements indicate that gamification enhances motivation, encourages participation, fosters collaboration, and improves learning outcomes such as vocabulary retention and confidence in using English. While some learners reported minor challenges related to task complexity and potential distractions, these do not detract from the overwhelmingly positive perceptions of gamified activities.

The findings suggest that gamification serves multiple functions in Saudi EFL classrooms: it motivates learners, facilitates active engagement, supports collaborative learning, and provides opportunities for self-directed improvement. The data also demonstrate that gamified pedagogies can be integrated successfully across diverse faculties, supporting English proficiency development in a wide range of academic disciplines. As a result, the study shows that gamification represents a promising strategy for enhancing the overall effectiveness of English language instruction in Saudi universities. (see Figure 1)

Figure 1. Saudi EFL Learners' Perceptions of Gamification-Enhanced English Learning



Discussion and Implications

The present study examined the influence of gamification on motivation and participation among Saudi EFL learners, highlighting both cognitive and affective dimensions of language learning. The findings revealed that gamified activities significantly enhanced learners' engagement, intrinsic motivation, collaboration, and perceived learning outcomes. These results corroborate prior research emphasizing gamification's role in creating interactive and student-centered language learning environments (Domínguez et al., 2013; Annetta, 2010). The high levels of agreement across multiple questionnaire items indicate that gamified pedagogies are perceived positively by Saudi EFL learners, aligning with previous studies demonstrating the potential of game-based interventions to foster motivation and sustained attention (Hanus & Fox, 2015; Mekler, Brühlmann, Tuch, & Opwis, 2017).

A primary implication of these findings is the confirmation that gamification can effectively

address motivational deficits prevalent in Saudi EFL contexts. Traditional English instruction in Saudi Arabia often emphasizes rote memorization, grammar drills, and teacher-centered methodologies, which can reduce learner engagement and intrinsic motivation (Alfallaj, 2020; Aljameel, 2022). By integrating point scoring, badges, leaderboards, and narrative-driven tasks, gamified activities provide immediate feedback and reinforce positive participation, supporting the development of learner autonomy and sustained effort (Rice, 2012; Aragonez et al., 2021). Specifically, learners' agreement with statements such as "Gamification motivates me to participate actively in English learning activities" ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 0.61$) reflects the strong motivational effect of well-designed gamified interventions, confirming earlier research that emphasizes the role of intrinsic motivation in EFL achievement (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Moskovsky et al., 2013).

The study also demonstrates that gamification enhances classroom engagement and collaborative behaviors. Learners reported increased willingness to contribute to discussions, engage with peers, and participate in interactive exercises, consistent with findings from Reinhardt and Sykes (2014) and Barata et al. (2013), who highlight that gamified platforms encourage authentic communication and peer collaboration. The positive responses regarding collaboration ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.66$) suggest that gamification fosters a learning community in which students co-construct knowledge and engage in authentic language use. In Saudi higher education, where student-centered pedagogies are still emerging, these findings are particularly significant, suggesting that gamification can bridge the gap between passive learning and interactive classroom participation (Almelhes, 2024; Thongmak, 2019).

Gamification's impact extends to digital engagement, an increasingly critical component in contemporary language learning. The study found that learners engaged more consistently with online learning platforms and exhibited greater focus during digital exercises when gamified elements were incorporated ($M = 4.14$, $SD = 0.67$). These findings resonate with prior studies emphasizing the role of digital gamification in sustaining attention, providing adaptive challenges, and facilitating autonomous learning (Reinhardt & Sykes, 2014; Hamari, Koivisto, & Sarsa, 2014). In contexts like Saudi Arabia, where learners may have limited exposure to English outside the classroom, digital gamified tools offer repeated practice opportunities, scaffolding, and feedback that can enhance both linguistic competence and learner confidence (Alamr, 2019; Alshammari, 2019).

The study further highlights the cognitive benefits of gamification. Learners reported improvements in vocabulary retention, task completion, and confidence in speaking English, which aligns with findings from Liu (2024) and Godwin-Jones (2014), who argue that gamified tasks support reinforcement learning, adaptive challenge, and meaningful practice. The structured yet flexible design of gamified interventions enables learners to progress at individualized paces, accommodating different proficiency levels and promoting equity in language learning outcomes (Domínguez et al., 2013; Hamari et al., 2014). This is particularly relevant for Saudi EFL classrooms with large student populations, where individualized feedback and attention are often limited.

Motivational dynamics observed in the study also underscore the balanced role of intrinsic and extrinsic incentives. While point scoring and leaderboards provide extrinsic reinforcement, narrative challenges, and interactive tasks foster intrinsic engagement and curiosity (Schlag et al., 2024; Aparicio et al., 2012). The findings suggest that when carefully designed, gamified activities can enhance learner self-efficacy, autonomy, and persistence without inducing dependency on external rewards, echoing cautionary recommendations from Hanus and Fox (2015) and Mekler et al. (2017) regarding overreliance on extrinsic motivators.

Cultural and contextual factors emerged as important considerations for effective implementation. Saudi EFL learners operate within classrooms influenced by hierarchical norms, social expectations, and limited exposure to English (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015; Al-Rashidi, 2025). Gamified approaches, when culturally sensitive, can provide low-stakes, collaborative, and competitive environments that respect these norms while promoting active language use (Almelhes, 2024; Alsadoon et al., 2022). For instance, using team-based competitions or narrative challenges allows learners to engage meaningfully without experiencing social discomfort or anxiety, supporting both cognitive and affective outcomes.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings have several implications. First, ELT instructors

should integrate gamification thoughtfully, aligning game mechanics with curriculum objectives and learner proficiency. Second, digital literacy and technological infrastructure must be considered to ensure equitable access and effective participation. Third, gamified interventions should balance competition with collaboration, extrinsic rewards with intrinsic engagement, and simplicity with cognitive challenge to maximize learning outcomes (Caponetto et al., 2014; Lo & Hew, 2021).

Policy implications also emerge. Higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia could incorporate gamification frameworks into language programs to enhance engagement, motivation, and autonomous learning. Training instructors in digital pedagogies and gamified design, as well as providing access to interactive platforms like Kahoot, Quizlet, and Classcraft, could institutionalize these strategies (Almelhes, 2024; Almufareh, 2021). Finally, integrating evidence-based gamification practices into national ELT curricula may improve language proficiency outcomes while fostering digital competence, collaboration, and learner autonomy.

Overall, this study contributes to a growing body of evidence supporting gamification in ELT, particularly in Saudi higher education contexts. By demonstrating that gamified activities enhance motivation, engagement, collaboration, and language proficiency, the study validates the pedagogical potential of game-based learning. Future research could explore longitudinal effects, variations across proficiency levels, and integration with blended learning modalities to further refine gamified approaches and maximize their impact on EFL learners in culturally specific settings.

Conclusion

The present study provides strong evidence that gamification can play a transformative role in enhancing motivation, participation, and learning outcomes among Saudi EFL learners. By incorporating game mechanics such as points, leaderboards, and narrative-driven activities, learners not only reported higher engagement but also demonstrated improvements in collaboration, vocabulary retention, and confidence in language use. These findings highlight gamification as a promising pedagogical approach to counter traditional teacher-centered methods, which often limit learner autonomy and intrinsic motivation in Saudi classrooms.

Beyond immediate motivational gains, the study also underscores the cognitive and affective benefits of gamified interventions, suggesting their potential to foster sustained attention, peer collaboration, and digital engagement in language learning environments. Importantly, cultural considerations remain essential: when aligned with local norms and educational contexts, gamification can bridge the gap between passive learning and active participation, thereby reshaping the EFL experience in Saudi higher education.

In conclusion, the study validates the potential of gamification to enrich English language teaching and learning practices in Saudi Arabia. For maximum impact, instructors, institutions, and policymakers must integrate gamification thoughtfully, balancing extrinsic and intrinsic motivators, and ensuring alignment with curricular goals. Future research should extend this work by investigating long-term impacts, variations across learner proficiency levels, and integration with blended or fully digital learning models. Such efforts will further refine the role of gamification in creating equitable, engaging, and effective EFL learning environments.

Acknowledgement:

The researcher would like to thank the Deanship of Graduate studies and Scientific Research at Qassim University for financial support (QU-APC-2025).

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Recebido em 12 de janeiro de 2026

Aceito em 27 de abril de 2026