



Original article

Gamification in ESL: A Framework for Enhancing Vocabulary Acquisition through Interactive Mobile Apps



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Received: 10 March 2026

Accepted: 22 April 2026

Published: 25 August 2026

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.31185/wjfh.Vol22.Iss3/Pt3.1746>



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Cite:

Mohammed, H. H., & slman, K. Khdr. (2026). Gamification in ESL: A Framework for Enhancing Vocabulary Acquisition through Interactive Mobile Apps. Wasit Journal for Human Sciences, 22(3/Pt3). <https://doi.org/10.31185/wjfh.Vol22.Iss3/Pt3.1746>

ABSTRACT

With the increasing demands of English proficiency in non-native speakers, vocabulary teaching has become a crucial element in the ESL process. Conventional methods tend to be based on passive memorisation that can restrain learner involvement and reduce speed of acquiring vocabulary. This paper suggests a gamified design of vocabulary acquisition via interactive mobile apps by combining gameplay, adaptive learning processes, and feedback, as well as learner-centered design. The research has a framework-based methodology that is backed by exploratory pilot data of ESL learners in a six-week period of time. The results show that engagement, motivation, and vocabulary retention of learners are improved with the help of the gamified environment. The study is practical since it presents a systematic model that puts both pedagogical and technological variables in one model underlining the opportunities of gamification as an effective approach to learning vocabulary in ESL.

Keywords: Gamification; ESL; Vocabulary Acquisition; Interactive Mobile Applications; Adaptive Learning

التلعيب في تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية: إطار مقترح لتعزيز اكتساب المفردات من خلال تطبيقات الهاتف المحمول التفاعلية

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المُستخلص

مع تزايد متطلبات إتقان اللغة الإنجليزية لدى المتعلمين غير الناطقين بها، أصبح تعليم المفردات عنصراً أساسياً في عملية تعلم الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية (ESL). تميل الأساليب التقليدية إلى الاعتماد على الحفظ السلبي، مما قد يحدّ من تفاعل المتعلمين ويبطئ من سرعة اكتساب المفردات. تقترح هذه الدراسة تصميمًا قائمًا على التلعيب لاكتساب المفردات عبر تطبيقات الهاتف المحمول التفاعلية، من خلال دمج عناصر اللعب، وعمليات التعلم التكيفية، والتغذية الراجعة، إلى جانب تصميم يركز على المتعلم. تعتمد الدراسة على منهجية قائمة على إطار نظري مدعومة ببيانات استطلاعية أولية لمتعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية خلال فترة ستة أسابيع. وتشير النتائج إلى أن بيئة التلعيب تسهم في تحسين مستوى التفاعل والدافعية واحتفاظ المتعلمين بالمفردات. وتكتسب الدراسة طابعًا عمليًا من خلال تقديم نموذج منهجي يجمع بين المتغيرات التربوية والتكنولوجية في إطار واحد، مما يبرز إمكانيات التلعيب كنهج فعال في تعليم المفردات في سياق تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التلعيب؛ تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة ثانية (ES) اكتساب المفردات؛ التطبيقات المحمولة التفاعلية؛ التعلم التكيفي

Introduction

Vocabulary is essential for language acquisition and use (Ahmad, 2023). It develops the four essential skills of language, which are reading, writing, listening, and speaking (Lee, 2024). ESL (English as a Second Language) students' ability to understand both spoken and written texts, and communicate their thoughts through speech and writing, is dependent on a solid grasp of the core vocabulary (Kumar, 2023). The process of acquiring vocabulary is especially complicated and depends on a number of interrelated factors, such as the length of time a learner is exposed to the target language, the effectiveness of the teacher, the provision of appropriate learning strategies, and so on (Chatterjee, 2023). Vocabulary can be enhanced through a number of resources, such as ESL language learning textbooks, online ESL learning modules, and language learning applications. Unfortunately, most resources go unused and end up gathering dust in the corner of the learner's room. On the other hand, there is a lack of authentic exposure to and use of new words in their real context, which in itself is a significant impediment to a learner's ability to use the language fully. Learners' engagement also suffers as dull teaching and learning activities are not effective. In addition, there is a risk of diminishing returns if the learners work without a support framework and clear goals, as this can lead to increased frustration, reduced progress, and a lack of confidence in their ability to master the target language.

For whatever reason, many still cite the traditional, non-dynamic and non-flexible techniques used to teach vocabulary (Bashir, 2023). The use of static, unappealing flashcards and word lists, along with other rote techniques, are poor and unengaging in the digital age (Singh & Bose, 2023). Unless more interactives are incorporated into the teaching process, there will be no interest in the

subject (Farhan & Gupta, 2024). Rote methods could give quick remembrance over the short term, but a lot of other methods, as well as the concept of vocabulary instruction, will not give a comprehension of the words being studied, and will not give methods of future usage and application (Chen and Park, 2023).

Additionally, rote techniques and other traditional approaches do not support the wide range of learning styles and preferences, whether it's visual, auditory, or kinesthetic learning. Additionally, the mass production of traditional techniques, learning experience for the individual is drastically reduced. Finally, the lack of traditional methods to provide meaningful, immediate feedback, learning goals and criteria, cognitive self-assessment methods, and self-monitoring goals significantly contribute to consumer dissatisfaction and the loss of interest in vocabulary learning. Gamification is a new concept in the education sphere and has demonstrated its effectiveness in overcoming the problems of traditional approaches to teaching (O'Brien, 2024). Gamification is the transfer of the elements of game design and game mechanics (points, badges, leaderboards, levels, and challenges) to non-gaming environments to enhance motivation and interaction (Ahmad and Khan, 2024). The possible applications will be in education, health, corporate training and enhancing user experience and outcomes. Mobile apps word games can be used to acquire ESL vocabulary. These applications enable students to learn more interactively through the use of interactive features such as assessments, stories, time and real life situations. Gamification promotes intrinsic motivation by attracting the inherent competitiveness, achievement and curiosity of the learners. Besides this interaction, gamified learning spaces also have pedagogical benefits (Zhao, 2023). They enhance adaptive learning which enables pupils to travel through difficult areas. Incorporation of these features into the learning process will increase the level of self-awareness in learners and allow them to set goals that will enable them to take charge of the learning process. In addition, gamification is consistent with contemporary learning theories, such as constructivism and experiential learning maximizing active involvement in the use of knowledge.

However, a critical analysis of the body of research reveals the following gaps. While there is an increasing trend in research on gamification in ESL settings, previous studies have mostly focused on the use of individual game elements or the assessment of particular gamified applications, with few attempts to develop holistic pedagogical models that systematically integrate gamification, adaptive learning approaches and vocabulary learning theories. Similarly, although a number of studies have reported benefits of gamified learning environments on motivation and engagement, there is a need for structured models that systematically explain the relationships between these elements in a coherent design that is suitable for ESL vocabulary learning.

However, this study aims to bridge this gap by suggesting an integrated gamified model that combines game elements, adaptive learning strategies, and vocabulary learning theories. The proposed framework is unlike current methods of fragmented implementation, and provides a systematic design that integrates pedagogic principles with technological affordances in mobile learning.

To offer initial evidence of the viability of the proposed framework, an ESL pilot study was designed to examine its potential effects on engagement, motivation and vocabulary retention. The

pilot aspect of the study should be considered as an exploration that aims to provide preliminary insights rather than causal evidence.

In this study, the researcher present such a gamification framework for enhancing vocabulary learning of ESL students via interactive mobile applications. This model seeks to bridge the gap between gamification principles and emerging educational technologies. as well new educational technologies (Johnson & Lopez, 2024). This study adopts a framework-based approach supported by exploratory pilot evidence.

Last but not least, the scope of the framework clarifies that it does aim to create a learner centric environment through engaging, personalization and pedagogy. It is a gamified language-learning system, which uses rewards, challenges and leader boards to learn a language as opposed to other games, which apply methods like spaced repetition and contextualisation (Patel and Singh, 2023). Also, the structure is also concerned with enhancing second language vocabulary retrieval and comprehension and enhancing the second language perseverance and exposure to learners.

This study can serve as a benchmark by extending the understandings of it is expected that this work will illuminate the novelties in esl learning designs and bring esl to higher levels interactive mobile app for language training next generation. . It emphasizes how a combination of technology, pedagogy and innovation is necessary to provide effective as well as enjoyable learning experiences.

2. Literature Review

The section is a review of the key strands of literature that are applicable to the proposed framework. It is structured around the interaction of learners, the acquisition of vocabulary, adaptive learning, and socialization. This agency assists in explaining how past research is used in designing a comprehensive gamified model of ESL vocabulary acquisition.

2.1 Gamification and Learner Engagement

Gamification refers to applying elements of game design in contexts outside of gaming to boost user engagement and motivation (Deterding et al., 2011). Education has increasingly incorporated gamification, making learning more engaging and interactive. Research shows that gamification learning environment helps improve student motivation and engagement and increases student performance (Hamari, Koivisto, & Sarsa, 2014). Within the learning environment, gamification has become one of the innovative learning solutions to motivate and increase learning participation. The learning activities become a more enjoyable experience, stimulating the inner desire of the students to teach (Deterding et al., 2011). The research indicates that gamification improves students learning engagement and motivates student participation. The learning experience transforms the educational experience focusing on the students by stimulating collaboration and providing on the spot feedback (Hamari, Koivisto, & Sarsa, 2014). The gamification experience creates satisfaction which increases the students desire to learn more. The learning activities thus taken through gamification bring the students to the flexibility of their learning experience and assist them in learning more. Nonetheless, engagement is not enough without being related to specific vocabulary-learning goals and pedagogical planning.

2.2 Gamification in Vocabulary Acquisition

Gamification has potential to enhance vocabulary learning in the field of language acquisition. Teachers can create an engaging learning environment by using different components of the games for vocabulary teaching. Gamification is an important element in developing learner engagement in e-learning settings, which has beneficial implications for vocabulary learning (Muntean, 2011). As a result, gamified learning tasks like vocabulary games and quizzes offer learners frequent opportunities to engage with unfamiliar vocabulary in an enjoyable way, leading to improved retention.

Vocabulary Learning Vocabulary learning can incorporate game mechanics and dynamics that are defined by players as specific types of activity, such as combat-based or story-based adventures. Competitive with rewards based instant feedback– systems in gamification can be employed for vocabulary learning too. Muntean (2011) explains that such systems can increase the amount of time students spend practicing new vocabulary. The amount of time students are willing to spend practicing can increase the size of their vocabulary. As noted by Nation (2013), the acquisition of vocabulary entails considerable effort and repetitive exposure to the words.

Research studies have been done investigating the positive influences of gamified vocabulary instruction. One example is the study done by (Nah, Zeng, Telaprolu, Ayyappa, and Eschenbrenner, 2014) which showed gamified learning tasks significantly improved students' learning and remembering of vocabulary than other more standard teaching methods. In the same way (Huynh, Zuo, and Iida, 2019) also showed gamified vocabulary instruction improved language learning student's motivation and the vocab learning outcome. This is evidence that instruction that is gamified is positive for motivation and learning vocab in language learners. Deterding (2011) concludes gamified tasks need to be designed in a way they encourage learning and achieve learning goals. Thus, vocabulary-oriented gamification must be interpreted as both a motivational and a systematic approach to teaching that underlines the repetitive exposure and contextual use and long-term memorization.

2.3 Adaptive and Personalized Learning in ESL

Another significant element of the proposed framework is the focus on personalization via adaptive learning technologies. Adaptive systems enhance user experience through engagement by tailoring learning materials to the user's individual needs and learning advancement. (Brusilovsky & Millán, 2007) refer to studies that indicate the effectiveness of adaptive learning technologies in language learning as more personalized adaptive learning technologies offer learning opportunities that are aligned with the user's emotional and cognitive levels, and as such, provide relevant feedback. This promotes user satisfaction and reduces cognitive load. This makes adaptive learning a central component of the proposed framework, as it allows vocabulary tasks to respond to learners' individual progress and needs.

2.4 Social Interaction and Collaborative Learning

Gamification promotes social interaction and co-operation in learning. Such components as peer competition, leader boards, and group missions encourage social interaction, knowledge sharing and healthy competition. Past researches have demonstrated that social interaction in formalized learning settings results in the increased motivation, engagement, and satisfaction of learners

(Anderson, 2016; Vasalou et al., 2007). This justifies the application of language in real life situations, which is especially crucial among ESL students. It is this reason that social interaction has been incorporated into the proposed framework as a facilitative process to support communication, peer learning and ongoing learner engagement.

2.5 Research Gap

Even though the existing literature has proven the usefulness of gamification to improve motivation, engagement, and vocabulary learning outcomes, they tend to focus on these aspects separately. Very little literature exists that combines game-play, adaptive learning systems, and pedagogical plans into a unified coherent framework specifically aimed at ESL vocabulary learning. This gap illustrates why a systematic framework to integrate these dimensions into a single instructional design is necessary, and the current study will do so.

3. Proposed Framework

3.1 Core Components

3.1.1 Gamification: is based on the implementation of game mechanics designed to attract, engage, and sustain learner participation (Deterding et al., 2011). The core game mechanics incorporated in this model include:

3.1.2 Badges and achievements: Badges and achievements are visible signs of learner achievement (e.g. passing a level or learning vocabulary sets), which in turn make them more motivated when they feel like they have achieved something (Muntean, 2011).

3.1.3 Leaderboards: leaderboards enhance competition by showing the user performance rankings, thus motivating the learners to enhance their progress by comparing their performance.

3.1.4 Levels and Progression Effect: Progression structures and levels incorporate vocabulary to a growing level of difficulty, enabling learners to develop their linguistic skills progressively without overloading their cognitive abilities.

3.1.5 Timed Challenges: Challenges that are time-based make cognitive processes more engaging as learners are expected to remember and use vocabulary on pressure within a specific time, which increases retention in a short period of time. These mechanics work in tandem to increase engagement, learning, and gradual vocabulary acquisition in the suggested model.

3.2 Interactive Learning Modules

The learning modules are interactive, which implies they offer flexibility in learning activities that may adopt various learning styles and preferences.

3.2.1 Quizzes and Flashcards: The activities allow acquiring vocabulary as students have a chance to become familiar with the vocabulary and actively remember the lexical entries (Kumar, 2023).

3.2.2 Scenario-based Activities: The activities put vocabulary into contexts of real life (e.g., ordering food or getting directions) that can build contextual awareness and real-life language use.

3.2.3 Multimedia Features: Multimodal learning through the use of images, audio and video helps to boost understanding among visual and audio learners.

The modules will be the primary interface by which the learners will be exposed to the vocabulary content, the game mechanics will be integrated with the pedagogical strategy in the proposed framework.

3.3 Feedback Systems

The proposed framework has an important contribution of the feedback systems in the effective learning of vocabulary.

3.3.1 Instant Feedback: Real time feedback can enable the learner to recognize mistakes and correct them immediately and thus reinforcing the proper use of words and enhancing memorability.

3.3.2 Progress Monitoring: Performance dashboards allow the learners to monitor their performance with respect to accuracy, vocabulary acquisition and learning time, facilitating self-regulated learning and ongoing improvement.

These feedback systems promote awareness of the learner and facilitate adaptive learning by offering continuous performance-based instruction in the suggested system.

3.4 Pedagogical Integration

Pedagogical integration is used to make sure that the proposed framework is based on the existing theories and instructional strategies of language learning.

3.4.1 Scaffolding Techniques: The model follows a progressive model of development where vocabulary is presented sequentially with simple high-frequency words then complex lexical items. This methodology promotes progressive knowledge acquisition and confidence of learners with time.

3.4.2 Spaced Repetition: The spaced intervals reinforce vocabulary items and increase the long-term retention of the vocabulary by combating the forgetting curve and ensuring repeated exposure.

3.4.3 Contextual Learning: Vocabulary is provided in contexts of meaning (e.g. use of example sentences and real life situations) which allows learners to comprehend and use lexical items in real life communication.

All these pedagogical strategies make sure that the elements of gamification are not deployed in isolation but are incorporated into a systematic learning process that can promote effective vocabulary acquisition.

3.5 Adaptive Algorithms

The adaptive algorithms allow the framework to customize the learning process according to the performance and behavior of each learner.

3.5.1 Learner Data Analysis: The system compares the data on the performance of learners (accuracy rates and response times) to determine the strengths and weaknesses of vocabulary acquisition.

3.5.2 Personalized Content Delivery: According to the performance data, the system dynamically changes the level of difficulty and suggests the proper vocabulary tasks according to the progress of the learner.

3.5.3 Adaptive Learning Paths: Students will be taken on tailored learning journeys that respond to their own needs in a way that offers the best balance between difficulty and ability.

Such adaptive mechanisms make the learning more efficient as they help to make the instructional material sensitive to the needs of the learners in the offered framework.

3.6 Social and Collaborative Features

Social and collaborative features enhance learner interaction and engagement within the proposed framework.

3.6.1 Peer Interaction: Collaborative activities like discussions, common tasks and group challenges allow learners to exchange knowledge and consolidate vocabulary learning with other learners.

3.6.2 Competitive Elements: Leaderboards and competitions will encourage learners to better their performance as they will develop a sense of achievement and development.

3.6.3 Collaborative Learning Environment: Collaborative learning is possible with the help of interactive platforms (discussion boards, group activities, etc.) that allow active learning between the learners.

These social, collaborative factors contribute to the long-term interest of the learner by introducing interaction, competition, and cooperation in learning.

3.7 User-Centered Design

User-centered design ensures that the framework is accessible, usable, and responsive to the needs of diverse ESL learners.

3.7.1 Usability and Interface Design: The framework focuses on an intuitive and user-friendly interface, which enables learners to orientate learning activities, monitor progress, and support functionalities effectively.

3.7.2 Visual Design: The graphics, animation and structured layouts are the visual features that are created to increase the interest of the learner and aid in understanding.

3.7.3 Multilingual Support: The system offers instructional support and information in different languages, which allows the learners of various language backgrounds to interact with the platform efficiently.

3.7.4 Accessibility Features: The framework includes access options that include customization of text access, audio support, and offline access to meet the needs of learners with various needs and technological limitations.

These design principles make sure that the framework is inclusive, flexible and accessible to a broad pool of learners.

4. Methodology

This research paper uses a framework-based research design that is guided by pilot evidence of exploration to investigate the viability of a gamified model of vocabulary learning in ESL. The approach is aimed at assessing the learner engagement, motivation and vocabulary performance in a realistic learning environment.

4.1 Research Design

The research is a qualitative-quantitative exploratory study that involves observational data and performance measures that were gathered in one pilot implementation. This design is not aimed at

creating causal relationships but giving initial clues on the applicability and effectiveness of the proposed framework.

4.2 Participants

The pilot study was conducted with a group of 150 ESL students of various levels (beginners, intermediate, and advanced). The sample was picked to incorporate a variety of learning needs and backgrounds to test the flexibility of the suggested framework.

4.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through system-based performance tracking and learner interaction with the gamified application over a period of six weeks. The collected data included:

- Learner engagement (frequency of use and activity completion)
- Vocabulary performance (task accuracy and retention indicators)
- Interaction patterns within the learning environment

In addition, general observational insights were used to support the interpretation of learner behavior and engagement trends.

4.4 Data Analysis

The analysis was mainly descriptive, paying attention to the patterns of engagement among learners, vocabulary development, and interaction with the system. The outcomes were not interpreted using an inferential statistical test, but instead by the elements of the proposed framework.

4.5 Study Limitations

The research lacks a control group or experimental comparison as it is an exploratory pilot study. Thus, the results are to be taken as suggestive but not definitive, which would form the basis of the future empirical studies.

5. Results

This part provides the results of the pilot implementation of the proposed gamified framework. The outcomes aim at interaction with learners and their retention of vocabularies as well as motivation with the data on the interaction with the system.

5.1 Learner Engagement

A pilot study showed that there was a significant improvement in the engagement of learners. There was an increase in exposure of vocabulary tasks among the participants as opposed to conventional methods of learning. This was expressed in higher rates of completion of tasks and rate of use over the six-week period. The trend implies that the gamified tasks were regularly interacted with by learners during the study.

5.2 Vocabulary Retention

These results indicate that there is an enhancement in vocabulary retention by the participants. The learners showed improved recall of vocabulary items with time, which can be attributed to repeated exposure to the vocabulary items through spaced repetitions and the contextual learning activities in the application. This shows that vocabulary could be retained and recalled more efficiently with time among learners.

5.3 Learner Motivation

The findings also show that there is an augmentation in the motivation of the learners. The percentage of the participants who have had positive learning experience is too large to be attributed to other elements like instant feedback, tracking progress, and rewards based on achievements. This indicates a favorable learning attitude towards the gamified learning environment.

5.4 Comparative Observations

The gamified approach seemed to facilitate quicker vocabulary interaction and willingness to use the system more among the learners, compared to the traditional vocabulary learning methods. Multimedia and scenario-based learning activities were also shown to be more interacted with by learners. This finding shows the possible benefit of gamified strategies as compared to traditional methods of learning vocabulary.

6. Discussion

The results of the current research give some initial evidence of the validity of the proposed gamified framework to learn vocabulary among ESL learners. The rise in learner activity recorded in the results could be explained by the incorporation of the game features like badges, leader boards, and timed challenges. These factors comply with the past studies emphasizing the use of gamification in increasing the motivation and engagement of learners. In the framework offered, these mechanics serve as the forces of the continued engagement with the vocabulary learning activities.

These changes in vocabulary retention can be attributed to the use of pedagogical methods like spaced repetition and contextual learning. These strategies facilitate the development of long-term memory and allow learners to use vocabulary in contexts that make sense, as is expected of the existing theories of language learning.

The fact that feedback systems and user-centered design elements are present can also be attributed to increased learner motivation. The ability to provide instant feedback, track progress, and reward achievement are some of the features that add to a more interactive, responsive learning experience and motivate learners to keep using the system.

Moreover, the flexible parts of the framework can generate individualized learning experiences, where learners can advance at their own level of performance. This flexibility improves the engagement and learning effectiveness especially in a mixed ESL setting.

Although these findings are positive, a number of limitations are to be realized. The research was based on exploratory pilot design which lacked a control group and the findings were mostly descriptive. Besides this, other variables like digital access and difference in technological proficiency could have affected interaction of learners with the system.

On the whole, these results demonstrate that it is essential to combine the elements of gamification with pedagogical strategies in a systematic framework and not consider them as isolated characteristics. This combined method is one of the main contributions of the current research.

7. Conclusion

This research paper introduced a gamification model of vocabulary learning in ESL through incorporating gameplay, pedagogical, and adaptive learning elements in a single model. The results of the pilot exploratory indicate that this kind of an integrated approach has the potential to enhance the engagement of the learners, their motivation, and their retention of their vocabulary.

However, despite the weaknesses, the research points at the significance of integrating the technological and pedagogical aspects into a systematic system instead of viewing them as independent characteristics. The suggested model gives a base to the further empirical research and development of gamified learning environment in language learning.

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