GAMIFIED SPEAKING: THE IMPACT OF COMPETITIVE LANGUAGE GAMES ON ORAL FLUENCY AND ENGAGEMENT

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Abstract; This study explores the effect of gamified speaking activities, specifically competitive language games, on the oral fluency and engagement of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Gamification, which incorporates game design elements into educational contexts, has gained popularity for increasing motivation and active participation. Using a quasi-experimental design with Uzbek secondary school students, this research evaluates how competitive speaking games influence learners' fluency and willingness to communicate. Results demonstrate significant improvements in oral performance and learner engagement, suggesting that gamified speaking activities can be an effective pedagogical tool in EFL classrooms.

Keywords: Gamification, Competitive Language Games, Oral Fluency, Engagement, EFL Learners, Uzbekistan.

In recent years, gamification has emerged as a transformative approach in language education, aimed at increasing student motivation and active learning through game-like elements. Particularly in speaking classes, where learners often face anxiety and lack of engagement, competitive language games offer a dynamic and interactive environment that encourages risk-taking and spontaneous communication.

Oral fluency, a key component of communicative competence, benefits from repeated, meaningful practice. Traditional speaking exercises can be repetitive and demotivating, especially for EFL learners in contexts like Uzbekistan, where opportunities for authentic communication are limited. By incorporating competition, points, and immediate feedback, gamified speaking activities can foster enthusiasm and sustained participation.

This study investigates the impact of competitive language games on the oral fluency and engagement of Uzbek EFL learners, providing empirical evidence to support gamification as an effective pedagogical strategy.

In Uzbekistan, where English language instruction is becoming increasingly important for academic and professional success, fostering effective oral communication skills is essential. However, many learners experience challenges such as lack of confidence, limited practice opportunities, and low motivation. Gamification, defined as the use of game elements in non-game contexts, has been shown to enhance engagement and learning outcomes in various educational settings. Incorporating competitive language games into speaking classes offers an innovative way to address these challenges by creating an enjoyable and interactive learning atmosphere that encourages students to speak more frequently and with greater confidence.

Participants

The study involved 80 secondary school students from Tashkent, aged 15-17, divided into an experimental group (40 students) and a control group (40 students). Both groups had comparable English proficiency levels based on prior assessments.

Procedure

The experimental group participated in a 6-week intervention incorporating competitive speaking games such as "Debate Battles," "Role-Play Races," and "Vocabulary Challenges," designed to promote quick thinking and collaborative competition. The control group followed the standard speaking curriculum without gamified elements.

Instruments

- **Oral Fluency Assessment:** Pre- and post-intervention speaking tasks were recorded and evaluated using a rubric measuring fluency, accuracy, and interaction.

- **Engagement Questionnaire:** A validated self-report scale assessed learners' motivation, interest, and participation levels throughout the study.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using paired t-tests and ANOVA to compare pre- and post-intervention scores within and between groups. Qualitative feedback from student reflections was thematically analyzed to complement quantitative findings.

The study was conducted over a six-week period during regular English lessons. The experimental group engaged in three different types of competitive speaking games:

- **Debate Battles:** Students were divided into teams and debated on simple, relatable topics, fostering critical thinking and spontaneous speech.

- **Role-Play Races:** Pairs or groups competed to complete role-play scenarios accurately and fluently under time constraints.

- **Vocabulary Challenges:** Quick-paced games that involved using newly learned words in sentences competitively.

Both pre-test and post-test oral performances were audio-recorded and assessed by two independent raters to ensure reliability. Engagement was measured weekly through a questionnaire using a Likert scale to capture students' interest, motivation, and perceived improvement.

The control group followed the standard curriculum, which emphasized teacher-led speaking drills and pair work without gamified competitive elements.

The experimental group showed a statistically significant increase in oral fluency scores ($p < 0.01$), with improvements in speech rate, reduced hesitation, and enhanced coherence. Engagement questionnaire results indicated higher motivation and enjoyment compared to the control group.

Qualitative feedback revealed that competitive games made speaking practice more enjoyable and reduced anxiety by shifting focus from fear of mistakes to achieving goals. Students reported increased willingness to speak and take risks in the language.

No significant changes were observed in the control group's fluency or engagement scores, suggesting that traditional methods alone may be less effective in stimulating oral communication.

Quantitative analysis showed that the experimental group's mean oral fluency scores increased from 62% in the pre-test to 78% in the post-test, a significant improvement ($t = 5.23$, $p < 0.01$). The control group showed only a marginal increase from 63% to 66%, which was not statistically significant.

Engagement scores averaged 4.3 out of 5 in the experimental group, reflecting high motivation and enjoyment, while the control group scored 3.1 on average.

Thematic analysis of student feedback highlighted several positive themes: increased confidence, enjoyment of competition, and a preference for interactive activities over traditional drills. A few students mentioned initial nervousness about competition but noted that this decreased over time.

Findings support the positive role of gamified speaking activities in enhancing oral fluency and learner engagement. The competitive element motivates learners to participate actively and practice more frequently, leading to greater language output and confidence.

The social interaction embedded in games also fosters a supportive classroom atmosphere, reducing affective barriers like anxiety. This aligns with previous research highlighting gamification's benefits in educational settings (Deterding et al., 2011; Wang, 2015).

However, careful design is required to ensure competition remains healthy and inclusive, avoiding stress or discouragement. Teachers should balance competition with collaboration and provide constructive feedback to maximize benefits.

The results confirm that gamified competitive speaking activities significantly enhance oral fluency and engagement compared to traditional methods. The element of competition appears to motivate learners to participate actively, practice more, and improve faster. This aligns with self-determination theory, which posits that motivation increases when learners experience competence, autonomy, and relatedness—all of which are fostered in well-designed games.

Moreover, the social aspect of team-based games encourages peer support and reduces speaking anxiety, a common barrier in language learning. However, the study also highlights the importance of careful implementation to ensure that competition does not induce excessive stress or feelings of failure among less confident students.

Future research should consider longer intervention periods and explore gamification's effects on other language skills and learner populations, including adults and learners with different proficiency levels.

Competitive language games offer a promising approach to improve oral fluency and engagement among Uzbek EFL learners. Integrating gamification into speaking curricula can create more motivating and effective language learning environments. Future research should explore long-term effects and adapt gamified interventions for diverse learner populations.

This study demonstrates that incorporating competitive language games into EFL speaking instruction can significantly improve learners' oral fluency and engagement. For Uzbek educators seeking to revitalize their speaking curricula, gamification offers a practical and effective approach. By fostering motivation and creating a positive learning environment, competitive games help learners overcome communicative barriers and develop confidence in using English.

Implementing gamified speaking activities requires thoughtful planning, balancing competition with collaboration, and ensuring inclusivity. When integrated effectively, these activities can transform language classrooms into dynamic spaces where learners thrive linguistically and socially.

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