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Article Review

A Systematic Literature Review on the Use of Gamification in English Language Teaching for Young Learners

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Abstract

Gamification has become a popular strategy in education for increasing student motivation and engagement. In English Language Teaching (ELT) for young learners aged 5 to 12, gamification is especially important because children in this age group learn better through play, interaction, and fun activities than through memorization. However, there is still limited understanding of how gamification specifically supports young learners' English learning. This study presents a systematic literature review (SLR) on the use of gamification in ELT for young learners. This study focuses on the intersection between two key variables—gamification and English instruction for children—and explains why their combination is meaningful. Gamification can address common learning challenges such as short attention spans and low motivation by creating interactive, engaging, and developmentally appropriate learning environments. This review followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines and used the Scopus database to collect articles published between 2016 and 2025. Of the 75 identified articles, 14 studies met the inclusion criteria and were analyzed. Results showed that gamification enhances student motivation, improves grammar acquisition through tools like Kahoot! and Quizizz, and supports engagement in hybrid learning settings. A key limitation of this review is its narrow focus on grammar, as most studies did not explore other essential language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Future research should examine how gamification can support a broader range of skills. This review offers practical insights for educators and researchers by highlighting how gamification can be applied thoughtfully to enhance English learning for young learners.

Keywords: *Gamification, English Language Teaching, Young Learners*

INTRODUCTION

Gamification has become an increasingly important strategy in English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly in engaging and motivating students. It involves adding game-like elements such as points, leaderboards, and badges to educational activities to encourage participation and improve learning outcomes. With the advancement of technology, gamification is now widely used in classrooms to create fun and interactive learning environments. One of its most effective uses is to help young learners develop their language skills.

Young learners, typically aged between 5 and 12 years old, are in a critical stage of cognitive and language development. At this age, children learn languages naturally through interaction, play, and social engagement rather than through traditional memorization. Because they have short attention spans, gamification provides an enjoyable and interactive way to keep them engaged. Using game-based learning can help children stay motivated, remember information better, and strengthen their language skills through meaningful activities.

Gamification is particularly useful for young learners because they face unique

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challenges when learning English. Gamified learning platforms help improve vocabulary, grammar understanding, and communication skills. Studies by Meng et al. (2021) and Dimitriadou (2018) have shown that gamification enhances student participation, encourages teamwork, and builds confidence in language use.

Gamification increases motivation, engagement, and knowledge retention using internal and external motivators. Kapp suggests that effective gamification strategies include rewards, competition, and storytelling to make learning more meaningful. Learning theories emphasize the importance of interaction and collaboration in language learning. Applying gamification in language classrooms creates a structured yet engaging environment in which students can actively participate and improve their language skills.

Several earlier investigations have explored how gamification influences educational settings. Research by Barahona Mora (2020) explored using gamified classroom management tools such as ClassDojo to encourage positive behaviors and student engagement. Ghaban (2021) studied how gamification elements in online learning platforms improved student motivation and learning outcomes. Similarly, Leitão et al. (2022) analyzed how competition and rewards affect student engagement. Other studies, such as Lam & Tse (2022), have examined how gamification supports motivation and classroom interaction in language learning settings.

Vrcelj et al. (2022), through a systematic literature review, examined how gamification can be integrated into primary and secondary education, with specific attention to young learners. Their findings indicate that although gamification is widely used in higher education, research on its application in primary and secondary schools is limited. While digital tools and game elements have been integrated into school curricula, more studies are needed to develop effective teaching frameworks for young learners.

While prior research on gamification exists, detailed insights into its influence on young learners within the context of ELT are still limited. Most studies have focused on gamification in subjects like mathematics (Jagušt et al., 2018) or general classroom applications rather than directly influencing language learning. There is a lack of systematic reviews that specifically investigate how gamification is applied in ELT for young learners, especially about skill-specific outcomes such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

In addition, the contextual backgrounds of gamification applications are rarely discussed. Many studies do not specify the country, educational system, or cultural setting in which gamification is implemented. This information is crucial for understanding the transferability and practicality of gamified approaches in diverse learning environments.

This study aims to systematically review the literature on the use of gamification in English Language Teaching (ELT) for young learners. By analyzing recent findings, this review highlights effective teaching strategies related to gamification in language-learning settings. The goal is to provide educators and researchers with insights into how gamification can be successfully applied to improve language learning, student motivation, and classroom engagement. This study addresses these gaps by conducting a systematic literature review (SLR) of research on gamification in ELT for young learners aged 5 to 12. This study focuses on two key research questions: What gamification strategies are used in ELT for young learners and how does gamification impact learning outcomes for young ELT learners?

RESEARCH METHOD

This systematic literature review (SLR) explores the role of gamification in English as a

Foreign Language (EFL) learning for young learners. This study follows the guidelines of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses, which provide a structured method for systematically reviewing research. This approach ensures that the selection and analysis of studies are transparent and organized manner. The process involves identifying, screening, selecting, and analyzing research articles related to gamification, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of current trends, challenges, and best practices.

Eligibility Criteria

This systematic literature review (SLR) follows a structured approach to ensure that only relevant studies are included. The criteria for selecting studies are as follows:

Table 1. Eligibility Criteria

No.	Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
1.	Date	Studies published within the last decade (2016–2025)	Studies published before 2016
2.	Setting	Studies specifically examining gamification	Studies non-specifically examining gamification
3.	Sample	Primary school students aged 5–12 years who are learning English	Junior and senior high school students learning English
4.	Language	Studies published in English	Studies published in non-English
5.	Database	SCOPUS	Other databases

Information Sources and Research Strategy

The literature search was conducted using a well-known academic database, SCOPUS. The following table shows the research strategies used when searching the data and how much the data was obtained.

Table 2. Information Sources and Research Strategy

Database	Research Strategy	Results
SCOPUS	S "TITLE-ABS-KEY (gamification AND young AND learners) AND PUBYEAR > 2016 AND (LIMIT-TO (EXACTKEYWORD, "EFL Learners"))."	75

Study Selection

The study selection process followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines. The selection steps were as follows:

1. Initial screening: The titles and abstracts are reviewed to determine whether the studies met the eligibility criteria.
2. Full-text review: The selected articles were evaluated to confirm their relevance to gamification.
3. Final selection: Studies that provide real evidence on how gamification affects English learning.

A total of 14 studies were selected for inclusion. Although the number may seem limited, it is justified by the specificity of the criteria, the focus on young learners and the applied nature of the topic within ELT.

Data Extraction and Analysis

To collect data, we used the key information extracted from each study that included; research design (author & year, methodology, sample, and aim) and findings related to teaching strategies to increase students' motivation, language skills, and gamification in hybrid language learning. These elements were selected because they represent the most commonly reported dimensions in gamification-ELT research and align with the aims of this study.

The analysis process involved thematic analysis to identify recurring themes across studies. Themes were grouped based on the effects of gamification on motivation, language skill development, and learning environments. To enhance reliability, the data extraction process followed a consistent coding framework. Although only one reviewer conducted the analysis, a second coder independently reviewed 30% of the extracted data to ensure inter-rater reliability.

To minimize potential bias, the researchers employed a transparent documentation process throughout the selection and analysis stages. Inclusion and exclusion decisions were clearly recorded, and any discrepancies were discussed and resolved collaboratively. In addition, triangulation with previous literature reviews was used to validate emerging themes.

Result

The search was initially conducted on March 25, 2025, retrieving 75 papers from SCOPUS. All retrieved papers were reviewed. After carefully examining the titles and abstracts, 59 papers were excluded for various reasons: 58 were unrelated to the topic, and 1 was a non-article (a book). After an eligibility assessment of the remaining papers, 14 studies were selected for analysis. The overall search and selection procedure is illustrated in Figure 1, following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines for systematic literature reviews.

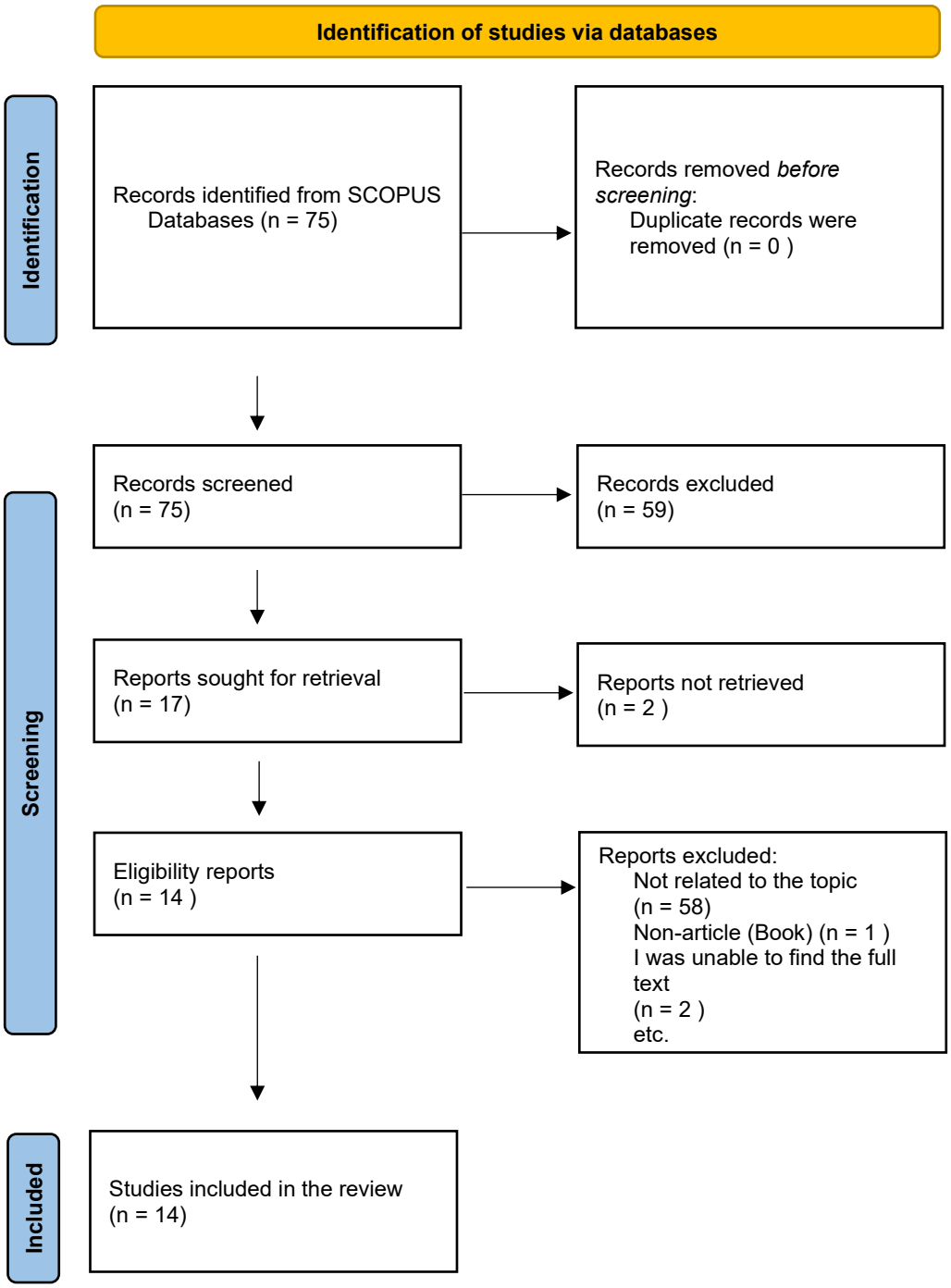

Figure 1. Diagram of the Screening and Selection Procedure

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results obtained from the reviewed studies are described in this part. Based on the thematic analysis, three main themes were found: Applying Teaching Strategies to Increase Students' Motivation through Gamification, Enhancing Language Skills through Gamification, and Integrating Gamification in Hybrid Language Learning. This elaboration aims to highlight effective teaching strategies in the use of gamification in English language learning for young learners. Each theme reflects how gamified approaches can positively influence student engagement, participation, and learning outcomes. Moreover, the analysis considers both digital and non-digital game elements, emphasizing their role in fostering interactive and student-centered environments. These findings offer insights into how game-based learning not only supports skill acquisition but also cultivates intrinsic motivation and sustained interest in language activities.

Teaching Strategies to Increase Students' Motivation

Students' motivation for learning English through gamification is crucial. According to the reviewer, adaptive gamified tests are an effective strategy to increase motivation because they adjust question difficulty based on student ability. This allows learners to feel challenged but not overwhelmed, thus supporting consistent engagement. Besides that, some elements like points, badges, leaderboards, and immediate feedback, when applied through structured teaching strategies, help build students' motivation by providing recognition, competition, and real-time progress tracking. 2 papers are included in this category: Zhang and Huang (2024) and Tsai (2020).

> *"The adaptive gamified assessment primarily enhanced intrinsic motivation related to competence, with 69% of students in the experimental group reporting increased abilities."* (Zhang & Huang, 2024)

> *"Gaming elements such as points, badges, leaderboards, and immediate feedback are frequently employed to promote learner engagement and motivation in gamified learning environments."* (Tsai, 2020)

A consistent and notable result of the analyzed research is that gamification significantly enhances learners' motivation in English language-learning settings. For example, Tsai (2020) implemented gamified instruction in an EFL linguistics course using elements such as experience points, badges, and leaderboards. It was found that students in the gamified group engaged more actively and were more motivated, in contrast to those in the non-gamified group, particularly in terms of relevance and satisfaction with the learning process. Game elements can serve as both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators by providing challenge, feedback, and progress indicators that foster a sense of competence and achievement.

Similarly, Imron et al. (2022) conducted a pre-experimental study involving high school students to assess the impact of gamification on motivation and English language-learning outcomes. The findings revealed a significant increase in students' motivation levels, with mean scores rising from 3.8 to 4.7 after the gamified intervention. In addition, improvements were observed in vocabulary acquisition and speaking skills, indicating that gamification can effectively enhance both motivation and language proficiency.

These motivational gains also resonate with sociocultural theory, which stresses the importance of interactive and socially meaningful learning contexts. Gamification, when implemented well, creates opportunities for collaborative problem-solving, peer interaction, and immediate feedback, factors that are known to support learners' zones of proximal development (ZPD). The interactive nature of gamified tools helps sustain motivation by fostering both cognitive

and emotional engagement.

However, not all studies reported strong motivational outcomes. For instance, Oliveira and Cruz (2018) noted that gamification is not uniformly effective across all learners and that individual learning preferences must be considered. Their qualitative study revealed that some learners felt less motivated when gamified tasks did not align with their learning styles. This indicates that gamification must be tailored to learner characteristics to ensure effectiveness.

A useful comparison can also be made with Idris et al. (2020), who used Kahoot! to reinforce grammar lessons for Year 3 students. They found that game-based learning lowered students' affective filters, thus increasing motivation, a result that supports Kapp's framework. By reducing anxiety and making the learning process more enjoyable, gamification supports sustained engagement.

Enhancing Language Skills

Grammar has emerged as the most commonly improved language skill through gamified learning tools. Game-based applications like Kahoot! and Quizizz were particularly successful at enhancing students' grasp of grammar concepts such as verb tenses. These tools not only offered repeated exposure to grammatical forms but also made the process engaging and context-rich, thus reducing learner anxiety and increasing retention. Yunus and Hua (2021) emphasized the effectiveness of gamified instruction in helping learners grasp irregular past-tense verbs.

> *"The findings of this research indicate that game-based learning is indeed beneficial in language teaching as it is effective in elevating the pupils' interest and learning of the English irregular past verbs."* (Yunus & Hua, 2021)

This finding is further supported by Navinkumar and Sivakami (2024), who noted that gamification, particularly through *Kahoot!*, offered an engaging grammar-learning environment grounded in social constructivist principles, which sustained student motivation and enhanced their exposure to grammar content. Likewise, Idris et al. (2020) reported a significant improvement in learners' understanding of the present tense following gamified instruction, confirming the positive impact of such platforms on grammar acquisition.

Recent empirical studies have consistently demonstrated that gamified learning tools significantly enhance grammar acquisition among ESL/EFL learners. These tools, notably *Kahoot!* and *Quizizz*, have been effective in reinforcing grammatical concepts by providing interactive and engaging learning experiences.

Among the reviewed studies, Navinkumar and Sivakami (2024) provided important evidence on the contribution of gamification to grammar learning among young ESL learners. Their study employed Kahoot! to teach prepositions to sixth-grade students and found that the interactive nature of the platform not only improved learning outcomes but also sustained student motivation. Importantly, the authors highlighted how Kahoot!'s game-based environment supported social constructivist principles by encouraging peer interaction, collaborative problem-solving, and active participation which posits that learners construct knowledge through social engagement and scaffolding. This suggests that gamified grammar instruction can be most effective when it promotes meaningful communication and peer-supported learning.

For instance, Pham (2023) conducted a study comparing the effectiveness of Quizizz-based quizzes to traditional paper-based quizzes over 10 weeks. The results indicated that students who used Quizizz scored significantly higher on the post-test in terms of grammar achievement compared to those in the control group. This indicates that using interactive elements in gamified platforms can positively influence students' grammar learning.

Similarly, Idris et al. (2020) explored the use of Kahoot! to teach the simple present tense to Year 3 ESL students. The study found that students achieved significantly better results on the post-test scores, attributing the success to the engaging features of *Kahoot*!, which increased motivation.

In a different context, Mauludi et al. (2024) implemented gamified learning strategies in an English course at the *Kampung Inggris* Language Center. This study reported a progressive increase in students' grammar scores across two cycles, highlighting the role of gamification in developing grammar skills and increasing student engagement.

In contrast, Tanihardjo (2022) examined the impact of quiz-based games on grammar learning. The study revealed that traditional methods yielded better results in learning grammar rules than gamified approaches, suggesting that the success of gamification strategies may be influenced by the learning context and content complexity.

However, there is a notable lack of research focusing on other language skills, such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. This highlights a limitation in the existing body of research, suggesting that future studies should explore gamification's effect on a broader range of skills.

Integrating Gamification into Hybrid Language Learning

Gamification is emerging as a highly effective strategy for improving engagement and learning outcomes in hybrid learning environments. This underscores how gamification reinforces the online preclass phase (e.g., gamified videos/quizzes) while enriching in-class activities (e.g., discussions based on game results), which is a hallmark of blended learning. This finding is explicitly supported by Fernández-Velásquez et al. (2025).

> *"Classrooms flipped with gamification elements not only facilitate knowledge acquisition but also increase student satisfaction due to personalization and content relevance."* (Fernández-Velásquez et al., 2025)

Supporting evidence is also presented by Li et al. (2024), who demonstrated that gamified formative assessment tools such as *Kahoot!* and *Quizizz* create an interesting feedback loop between digital practices and classroom teaching. Their research noted that immediate grading and leaderboard ratings during online quizzes motivated students to actively participate in subsequent face-to-face remedial sessions, effectively bridging the two learning modes.

Based on the findings above, gamification is an effective teaching strategy for young learners' English learning. These strategies include the use of adaptive gamified tests for motivation, vocabulary and grammar-based games for language skills, and integration in a hybrid model for optimal learning outcomes. Overall, these findings support the research aim, which is to highlight effective teaching strategies through gamification in English language learning for young learners.

The use of gamification has become an effective approach to boost student engagement and improve learning achievements in hybrid learning environments, which combine online and face-to-face instructional modalities. By integrating game elements such as points, leaderboards, and badges, educators can create cohesive learning experiences that bridge digital and physical classrooms. Recent studies' findings indicate that this method can significantly enhance student engagement, motivation, and language proficiency.

A significant contribution to this topic is Fernández-Velásquez et al. (2025), who explored how gamification has been implemented in the context of flipped classrooms through a systematic literature review. Their findings showed that gamified flipped instruction not only increased content retention and learner satisfaction but also encouraged autonomy and interactive learning. These benefits arise from the personalized and relevant nature of gamified content elements that

are central to emphasizing that well-designed game mechanics, such as rewards and challenges, can enhance motivation and improve knowledge retention. Furthermore, this aligns with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, as flipped gamified environments often require peer collaboration, teacher-guided feedback, and scaffolded discussions, all of which promote deeper cognitive development in hybrid learning.

For example, Imron et al. (2023) investigated the use of gamified strategies in a hybrid English learning context and found significant improvements in students' motivation, vocabulary acquisition, and speaking performance. Their results reinforce the idea that combining digital gamification with classroom interaction creates an engaging and effective learning environment.

Similarly, Noori (2025) investigated how gamification combined with social media platforms can be used to enhance EFL learners' English grammar learning. The study found that incorporating game elements like points and leaderboards, along with social media tools such as WhatsApp and Facebook, significantly enhanced student engagement and grammar retention. Students reported increased confidence in using grammar structures and reduced language learning anxiety, highlighting the benefits of gamification in blended learning environments.

Further support comes from Biantoro et al. (2023), who implemented a hybrid gamified English-speaking club using Google Classroom, combining physical activities and online games like Scrabble and Flashcards. The hybrid model led to improved speaking fluency and student enthusiasm, particularly because of the structured, gamified feedback cycles that mirror Piaget's concept of active discovery learning.

However, not all research finds hybrid gamification to be equally effective. A contrasting study by Wen (2023) explored the impact of implementing gamification in learning on the development of second language skills among primary school learners. While the study confirmed that gamification increased enjoyment and engagement, it found that the improvement in core language skills was not significantly higher than that in non-gamified environments. Wen concluded that although gamification boosts motivation, its success in enhancing measurable learning outcomes depends on thoughtful instructional design, age-appropriateness, and curriculum integration. These findings echo Kapp's warning against "surface-level" gamification and stress the importance of aligning game mechanics with cognitive development principles.

Although numerous studies have validated gamification's positive role in hybrid language learning, especially among young learners, its effectiveness has not been universal. Success depends on how well the game elements are designed to align with learners' developmental needs, instructional goals, and content complexity. When implemented meaningfully, gamification complements both sociocultural and constructivist learning frameworks, offering young learners dynamic, engaging, and collaborative environments for English language development. Furthermore, effective integration requires careful attention to age-appropriate challenges, feedback mechanisms, and the balance between extrinsic rewards and intrinsic motivation. Educators must also ensure that gamification does not overshadow pedagogical intent or reduce learning to mere competition.

The findings reflect both the opportunities and limitations of gamification in ELT for young learners. While gamification enhances motivation and grammar acquisition, its broad impact on other skills remains underexplored. These insights call for a more nuanced implementation of gamification, especially when considering learner diversity, learning environments, and long-term outcomes. Future research should investigate how gamified tasks influence higher-order thinking skills, language fluency, and learner autonomy across varied instructional contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

This systematic literature review investigated the use of gamification in English language

teaching (ELT) for young learners aged 5–12. The findings confirmed that gamification offers promising strategies to enhance motivation, grammar acquisition, and learner engagement in both traditional and hybrid learning environments.

First, multiple studies have demonstrated that gamification elements such as points, badges, leaderboards, and feedback loops significantly increase student motivation. These results support Kapp's Gamification Theory and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory by highlighting the role of motivation, feedback, and social interaction in learning. These extrinsic motivators can transition into intrinsic motivation when students feel a sense of accomplishment and progression, especially when tasks are aligned with their developmental level.

Second, platforms like Kahoot! and Quizizz were widely used to teach grammar and promote engagement and improve learning outcomes. However, this review is limited by its focus on grammar, as most selected studies emphasized this skill while neglecting listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Future research should examine gamification's role in developing these broader language skills. A comprehensive understanding of gamification's effectiveness requires exploring its impact on receptive and productive skills, as well as its integration in communicative and task-based learning settings.

Third, gamification in hybrid or blended learning showed promise in enhancing satisfaction and participation. Nevertheless, results were mixed; some studies, like Wen (2023), found increased motivation but no significant gains in core skills. This suggests the importance of pairing gamification with thoughtful instructional design. Without pedagogical alignment, gamified activities may entertain but fail to deliver meaningful learning outcomes.

This review contributes to theory by reinforcing Kapp's Gamification Theory through evidence of increased motivation, engagement, and learning retention when game mechanics are meaningfully integrated. Additionally, the findings validate and extend sociocultural learning theories (Vygotsky, Piaget), particularly in how gamification promotes collaborative learning and scaffolding in both physical and digital settings.

From a practical standpoint, this review provides actionable insights for educators, curriculum developers, and school administrators. Teachers can apply gamified strategies to boost engagement, while curriculum designers and policymakers can support their integration into primary education through appropriate tools and training.

Overall, this review offers a unique contribution by focusing specifically on young learners within ELT, a group that has received limited attention in prior gamification research. Future research should continue to expand this work by exploring its impact on a wider range of language skills and in various educational contexts.

LIMITATION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

The limitations of this study include the limited number of reviewed articles, which totaled only 14 due to the narrow inclusion criteria and topic specificity. Most of the studies also focused on grammar-related outcomes, with minimal exploration of other essential language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In addition, the reviewed studies were conducted in specific geographic or cultural contexts, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader populations.

Another limitation lies in the lack of interdisciplinary integration. The reviewed studies mostly focused on general ELT settings without investigating the intersection of gamification with STEM education or digital literacy.

For the following implications, teachers should not view gamification as a one-size-fits-all solution. Instead, gamified instruction should carefully consider learner characteristics, language proficiency, and learning objectives. The game elements should be meaningful, developmentally

appropriate and integrated into well-structured lessons to ensure effectiveness.

For further research, long-term and experimental studies are recommended to explore how gamification impacts learners' development across all language skills. Researchers should also consider examining the design and effectiveness of gamified instruction in interdisciplinary contexts, particularly its integration into STEM-related language curricula, digital literacy programs, and blended models that combine English with science or math learning.

In summary, while gamification holds great promise, its success depends on thoughtful implementation and contextual alignment. Future studies should investigate how gamification can support interdisciplinary learning and meet the evolving demands of digital and STEM-oriented education.

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