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DEVELOPING SOFT SKILLS THROUGH GAMIFIED ENGLISH LANGUAGE ACTIVITIES (ZOMBIE CHALLENGE SERIES)

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Abstract

The goal of this study was to explore the effects of gamification on a short course that aimed to develop soft skills among students of a vocational school in Sabah. English language was used as the medium of instruction during the task and four target grammatical forms were integrated into the gamified context: sequence connectors, conditionals, modal verbs and sentence construction. The gamified context consisted of four levels where the students were expected to solve the challenge before moving to the next level. The gamified activities were named “Zombie Challenge Series” since its narrative derived from the popularity of zombie in the entertainment and technology industry. There were several game elements that were incorporated into the task. The students were interviewed in order to elicit their perception related to the gamified activities. The findings showed that the students became more aware of the linguistic features that they were expected to use and the cognitive skills needed to solve the challenges. They became more motivated to learn and they were able to develop their soft skills better.

Keywords

Gamification, Grammatical Forms, Game Elements, Challenges, Levels

1. Introduction

Gamification is defined as the incorporation of elements and design of games into non-game context (Werbach & Hunter, 2012). It is gaining popularity in educational institutions since video games has a major part in students' lives as one of the most common hobbies and this approach capitalizes on this trend to create an engaging learning environment for students especially in the era of 21st century where changes in teaching approach are necessary. More research on gamification has been done in other subjects but there has been an increase on studies of gamification in language learning especially English language (Garland, 2015). In language learning, gamification is consistent with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT). Malone (2012) explained that CLT emphasizes enhancement of learners' experience as well as linking language learning with the outside world. Skehan (1998) described TBLT as learning practice that focuses on meaning than form, completion of tasks and assessment of the outcomes of tasks as well as its relationship to comparable real-world activities. Similarly, gamification enhances students' learning experience by the adaptation of the elements of video games into its activities and design and it prioritizes completion and outcome of task. Sailer, Hense, Mandl, and Klevers (2013) listed several important aspects of gamification: a goal that the players (learners) have to achieve, rules that determine how the goal is achieved and feedback system on progress towards the final goal.

This research would explore the potential effects of gamification on students' development of soft skills while they are expected to use English language during the activities. Airaksinen (2018) examined the potential use of gamification in soft skills training for a project that involved personnel from various organizations including education, consulting and security. The researcher applied three methods which comprised of survey, interviews and benchmarking and found out that feedback, team discussion, repetition and motivation, intrinsic and extrinsic, were the most important factor in fostering the soft skills among the participants.

2. Problem Statement

The students at Keningau Vocational College generally had average and lower level of English proficiency. Their limited skills in using English language might affect their communication skills, technology and media literacy skills as well as level of confidence which could potentially harm their career prospect in the competitive industry of job market and business in the real world. These three characteristics, along with so many other skills

like problem-solving and teamwork, are considered as soft skills that students of vocational studies should be able to acquire and demonstrate. At Keningau Vocational College, there were two weeks of short courses that students had to take every semester and one of the module was assigned to a group of English language teachers for them to teach the first year students. The teachers decided to adapt the module containing four objectives into a gamified series of four activities in which each of the activities was aligned with one of the objectives. They also decided to integrate language focus into the activities and use English language as medium of instruction. Hence, there were two research questions that this study attempted to address as stated in the followings:

3. Research Questions

There were two main objectives of the study. The first one was to find out whether the gamified activities encouraged them to use English language and the second one was on determining whether it enabled them to develop their soft skills.

1. How did gamified ESL activities enable learners to acquire English language?
2. Which soft skill that gamification helped the students acquire most throughout the activities?

4. Gamification in Learning

Gamification offers students challenging learning experience as they are expected to accomplish one objective at one stage of a task before moving to the next stage. This feature enables teachers to design lessons by finding commonalities between learning and games as well as revising their practice based on their reflection on this concept (Flores, 2015). Elements of game embedded in a series of activities can positively influence students' behaviors and attitudes that subsequently nurture intrinsic motivation in them (Landers & Landers, 2014). One particular caveat of gamification is the overreliance on extrinsic motivation which can be risky as such external source of motivation can lead to declining level of motivation and learning over time including in gamified context (Hanus & Fox, 2015). Fogg (2002) claimed that since gamification serves as a platform for students to interact with each other as they complete the challenge, it fosters their social skills particularly their ability to respond to emotions like joy, frustration and empathy as well as abiding by social rules like taking turns. There are several elements of games that can be integrated into non-game context as stated in Table 1 (Dickey, 2005).

Table 1: Elements of Gamification

Elements	Description
Points	Numeric accumulation based on certain activities.
Badges	Visual representation of achievements for the use shown online
Leaderboards	How the players are ranked based on success.
Progress bars/Progression	Shows the status of a player.
Performance graph	Performance graph
Performance graph	Shows player performance.
Quests	Some of the tasks players have to fulfill in a game.
Levels	A section or part of the game
Avatars	Visual representation of a player or alter ego.
Social elements	Relationships with other user through the game.
Rewards/reward system	System to motivate players that accomplish a quest.

4.1 Gamifying Short Course

The short course on developing soft skills comprised of four main objectives which were to develop teamwork, problem solving skills, interaction skills as well as analytical skills. The English language teachers decided to utilize Zombie as the central theme of the activities especially in creating the context for the gamification in line with the popularity of zombies in TV shows, movies, video games and songs. The gamified English language activities were referred to as “Zombie Challenge Series” and it was incorporated with the elements of video games like challenges, context, levels, badges, points, rewards and rules. There were four levels and each level was given different grammatical forms and they were modal verbs, sequence connectors, conditionals and sentence construction.

In addition to the game elements and grammatical focus, Zombie Challenge Series was designed by taking into account of several important findings on gamification from past studies. A study conducted by Attali (2015) found out that awarding points based on speed and accuracy might impair learners’ responses as they focused more on giving answers as quick as they could than taking the proper time to decide on correct answers. This was due to the technical aspect of the gamified activities that encouraged participants to increase the speed of their responses in order to increase their chance of getting more points. Hence, the gamified context of the task for this study was designed in a way that only the quality and

accuracy of their answers were assessed while each team was given the same amount of time to complete one challenge at a time.

Garland (2015) discovered that while gamification can be used for both young and older learners, the concept is more feasible and effective if it is used on older learners especially students who are at university and this can be attributed to the age range of most video games players which is 18-32. The age range of the students involved in the gamified activities that this study attempted to examine was 15-16 years old. Another discovery made by Garland (2015) was that gamification is more efficient and achievable if it is in language classroom for a shorter amount of time. Hence, although gamification can and should be conducted over a series of lessons or activities, it should be restricted to shorter courses only. This is consistent with the amount of time taken to carry out the gamified task that this study explored since it was only conducted in one day for a specific course. Each of the students were given a wrist band as a substitution for badges once they completed a particular level. The use of badges or any other reward in gamification can be excellent motivational tools for students to challenge themselves in a competitive task (Glover, Campbell, Latig, Norris, Toner & Tse, 2012).

4.2 Zombie Challenge Series

Zombie Challenge Series comprises four levels: Zombie Escape, Zombie Defense, Zombie War and Zombie Hunt. The levels are structured as a sequence of increasingly challenging tasks whereby each level has to be completed in order for the students to move to the next level. Students' performance in each task is evaluated and scored and the number of points they receive will determine the rewards that give them advantage in the following task. Since this innovation was developed according to the concept of gamification, it is embedded with features that define video games and these include challenges, context, levels, badges, points, rewards and rules.

In *Zombie Escape*, students are expected to solve a riddle in saving everyone from incoming zombies and they are expected to use sequence connectors to describe their answers in a clear and organized way. Their scores at this level determine the amount of additional cash they receive that will give them an advantage at the next level.

Zombie Defense is the second level where students need to wisely plan on their shopping list based on a limited amount of money given to them. They are required to use conditionals in considering what items that they should spend their money on. Their scores at this level determine the amount of extra time they can choose to use to complete the next task.

Zombie War is the third level that encourages students to strategize how they delegate roles and responsibilities to their team members so they can fight back against the zombies while defending their shelter. They are expected to use modal verbs in explaining what every single member of team will be doing. Their performance will determine the number of hints that will help them solve the next problem in the fourth level.

Zombie Hunt is the final level where the students need to decipher a secret message in order to save humankind and put a permanent end on the zombie apocalypse. The task requires them to construct sentences properly. If they succeed at this level, they have earned their triumph against the zombies and save the world.

5. Methodology

The research was conducted on a group of six students who were randomly selected from the nearly 150 participants of the Zombie Challenge Series. Their English proficiency was considered average and they came from several districts in the state. Their native languages were Dusun, Bajau, Malay and Chinese. A series of interviews was carried out on the respondents and there were five main semi-structured questions that they were expected to answer. The questions were designed to elicit their responses on the possible effects of the gamified activities on their English language, soft skills, motivation and value. The responses gathered from the interview session were coded and categorized according to specific themes.

6. Findings & Discussions

The findings from the interview indicated several responses that could be identified from the students. These responses were coded and categorized into different themes. There were three major aspects of learning that could be drawn from the students' responses: encouraging them to utilize language focus, increasing their level of engagement and fostering their soft skills.

6.1 Stimulating Metalinguistic & Metacognitive Skills

The students stated that the requirement for them to use specific target forms like sequence connectors, conditionals and modal verbs increased their understanding of how these forms should be used and most importantly, it enhanced their awareness of its significance, its relevance, its functions that they did not really take notice before. They could begin to comprehend the functions and significance of particular grammatical forms. They realized how modal verbs could be used to indicate capabilities and possibilities while

sequence connectors might be useful in putting explanation in order, clear and interrelated. They felt that conditionals facilitated the discussion in deciding on something by looking at different possibilities and perspectives. This signified not just their awareness of the significance of these target forms but also their awareness of thinking processes which were involved in completing the task as they used these linguistic features. Garcia (2017) who conducted her research on the gamification of English language teaching as a foreign language in primary education claimed that the approach stimulated learners' development of both metalinguistic and metacognitive skills as they acquired the language. Her findings indicate that gamified context improves learners' awareness of linguistic features as well as thinking processes that they should learn and use. She further added that the authentic context enables learners to practice all four language skills in a way that they are able to comprehend what and why they are doing it in their mission of completing the task. Table 2 signified the link between specific language forms with cognitive skills that these forms activated as observed from the students' performance and perception.

Table 2: Metacognitive & Metalinguistic Skills

Level	Language Focus	Cognitive Skills
Level 1: Zombie Escape	Sequence Connectors (<i>e.g. first, second, then</i>)	Putting things/ideas in order
Level 2: Zombie Defense	Conditionals (<i>If + simple present</i>) If we buy a motorcycle, we can easily run from the zombie	Cause & Effect relationship, possibilities & alternatives
Level 3: Zombie War	Modal Verbs (<i>e.g. can, should, may, need</i>) We need to build barriers, we should ration our food supply	Capabilities & Possibilities

Level 4: Zombie Hunt	Anagram Claste – Castle unqee – queen ogfl - golf	Interpretation, creativity, decoding skills. Possibilities
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6.2 Catalyzing Engagement in Learning

The students explained how they felt excited to complete every particular challenge not just because they were determined to solve the problem but also they were eager to move on to the next challenge. Muntean (2011) argued that game elements offer students both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. They become motivated with external rewards like badges and points while sense of achievement, autonomy, sense of belonging and mastery gives them the intrinsic motivation. This shows that gamified learning experience motivates students not just through tangible rewards like scores and badges but also its mechanism of empowering learners with ownership of their own efforts and drive to accomplish their goals. The concept of completing one goal at a particular challenge in order to move to the next goal of another challenge gives students clarity of what learning outcomes they are expected to achieve which also motivates them to be actively involved in the activities (Flores, 2015). It is evident that the nature of gamification challenges students to perform better in every task as they are able to set clear targets of what to do and what to achieve. – getting feedback

6.3 Facilitating the Development of Soft Skills

The students stated that they also learned how to work as a team, to discuss their opinions, to accept others' answers and to make the best decision under pressure. They pointed out how difficult it was to reach a decision when they had to work in team with many suggestions and conflicting ideas within various constraints like time limit and rules. They claimed that the task helped them become better individuals as they learnt to take responsibility and risks in confirming their decisions. This is consistent with Doyle (2018) who argued that decision-making skills as the most essential component of soft skills yet. She broke it down into six sequential steps that first starts with identifying the details of the issue, opportunity or problem and this is followed by the second step of generating a myriad of feasible solutions. The third step is the assessment of the risks and benefits of every potential solution before confirming the proper solution or response based on gathered information as the fourth step of the process. The fifth step is the implementation and it eventually ends with the evaluation of the impacts of the chosen solution. Soft skills are difficult to learn and the skills encompass a broad range of characteristics and abilities: attitude, ethic, decision-

making, time management, communication, creativity, conflict resolution, teamwork, positive mindset and flexibility (Doyle, 2017).

7. Recommendation

This study only explored the students' awareness and application of specific grammatical forms and it is suggested that future research on gamification in English language teaching to examine the interaction that takes place during the task and how gamification can influence their use of English language as they solve the task. In addition, this study did not examine specific English language lessons which were gamified but rather studied a short course on soft skills that was gamified and English language was used as the medium of instruction.

Dale (2014) explained four types of motivational behaviors which can be triggered by gamification: express, compete, explore and collaborate. There are people who enjoy expressing themselves in creative ways while there are people who seek to explore different goals and ways of learning. There are those who are driven by competition which turns them to be active participants while there are who prefer the opposite, they love to collaborate and enjoy doing things together and develop a sense of belonging. Future research on gamification should examine to what extent gamification influences students' motivational behaviors.

There are also types of players in games that can be translated to type of players in gamified context. Bartle (1996) categorized video game players into four categories: achievers, explores, socializers and killers. Marczewski (2013) refined these categories by creating five types: players, socializers, free spirit, achievers and philanthropist. More studies should be conducted on the roles that learners assume in gamified context of English language learning and how these roles can potentially affect their learning experience and the expected outcomes from the task.

8. Conclusion

The findings of the research showed that gamification is a plausible method that can be utilized to instill soft skills among students while getting them to focus on particular target forms in the English language. This means that gamification can be carried out in English language classes although more studies need to be done to further refine the process of integrating it into syllabus and other teaching methods. Garland (2015) claimed that there

were very few studies related to gamification in language learning as most studies in gamification was done on science and technology fields. This implies the need for future research in language learning to focus on the potential effects of gamification in learners' acquisition of target language. Hamari et al. (2014) and Hanus and Fox (2015) cautioned educators and researchers that the effects of gamification might not be as desirable as they seem since there is a possibility that excitement of the game elements might be caused by a novelty effect. Gamification is still considered as a new trend and that might have caused people to feel optimistic and exuberant over its application but such feelings may gradually disappear. However, it is still crucial for educators and researchers to continuously research and improve this method in order to cater to the evolving needs of learning experience in line with the ever changing world.

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