GAMIFICATION IN TEACHING ENGLISH GRAMMAR TO ADULT LEARNERS: BENEFITS, CHALLENGES, AND PROPOSED PEDAGOGICAL PRINCIPLES

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Abstract: *Grammar is one of the fundamental components of language knowledge that contributes to the development of English skills among learners of English as a foreign language. Particularly, adult learners have certain benefits owing to cognitive ability and self-awareness of learning needs and face various challenges associated with pressure and confidence in showing their English ability in front of others. In this context, the application of gamification - an innovative and creative approach with the use of game elements like sounds, colours, images, diverse task formats and competition may help create a more engaging and effective learning environment for adult learners if they are integrated into grammar lessons in a pedagogically appropriate manner in accordance with adult learners' distinctive characteristics and learning objectives.*

Key words*: gamification, English grammar teaching and learning, adult learners*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Grammar is one of the important components in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Learning grammar is often perceived by learners as a tedious activity because of the exposure to linguistics rules and structures and it requires systematic and repeated practice so that learners can strengthen their ability to recognize, remember and use grammatical patterns accurately and appropriately. Against this background, gamification has received increasing attention as a potentially useful approach to enhancing interaction and learner engagement in educational contexts. Game elements in gamification like points, challenges, rewards, immediate feedback, and leaderboards can be incorporated to create more varied learning experiences, particularly for content that requires extensive practice such as grammar. This may be particularly relevant to adult learners who have distinctive learning characteristics and needs while previous studies have mainly focused on learners at younger age like high school students or university students. In response to the issues, this paper examines the benefits and challenges of the application of gamification to English grammar teaching to adult learners. Following this, the paper proposes a set of pedagogical principles to guide the design and implementation of gamified grammar-learning activities, ensuring not using gamification merely as a means of making learning activities more enjoyable but also facilitating the educational purposes.

II. GAMIFICATION

Gamification is the use of game elements like points or leaderboards in non-game context (Deterding et al., 2011). From the perspective of activity features, (Werbach, 2014) stated that gamification is the process of turning non-game activities into game-like experience. The purpose of using this approach is to make activities more engaging because games are often associated with enjoyable experiences. Game components which are frequently used in non-game contexts are points, leaderboard, awards and immediate feedback.

III. GAMIFICATION IN ENGLISH GRAMMAR TEACHING AND LEARNING

Gamification can be applied in various contexts, especially in EFL classrooms. Studies have shown that it is used the most commonly in vocabulary teaching, followed by grammar and language skills. In traditional grammar lessons, teachers often provide students with grammatical rules and forms and design worksheet involving repeated practice to facilitate learners' memorization of grammatical patterns. With modern approaches in English teaching, the incorporation of entertaining elements to make grammar classes more lively, relaxing and interactive has been highly appreciated. For example, grammar contents are put onto the websites like Wordwall, Quizziz or Kahoot! - online platforms for interactive activities in which learners answer questions within a limited time and earn points for correct answers. This makes learning experience become a game show in which teachers act as hosts and learners compete with each other (Wang, 2015), motivating learners to enthusiastically take part in classroom activities and reinforce grammatical knowledge better. The ability of memorizing knowledge is facilitated by the elements of sounds, colours, shapes, images and competition.

IV. ADULT LEARNERS' ENGLISH GRAMMAR LEARNING

In this paper, adult learners refer to individuals who have already completed university education. On the one hand, adult learners possess characteristics which can facilitate their English grammar learning. First, they generally have more developed cognitive capacities, greater life and learning experience and longer attention span compared to younger learners. This may support them in understanding abstract grammar concepts. In terms of motivation and attitude, they are likely to demonstrate strong commitment in their English learning if they set clear learning goals. Adult learners are pushed mainly by their intrinsic motivation rather than extrinsic motivation (Knowles, 1984).

On the other hand, adult learners sometimes face a number of challenges due to some of their specific features. Many mature learners have to balance English learning with work, family responsibilities and other personal commitments. These may create time constraints, fatigue or psychological pressure which affects their learning experience. In addition, some adult learners are anxious about their English competence and concerned about making mistakes and losing face when demonstrating their English ability in front of others.

Given adults learners' characteristics, it is necessary for teachers to adopt both traditional and modern approaches when teaching English grammar to them. Conventional ways of teaching grammar often involve presenting and explaining grammatical rules followed by controlled practice while new methods of teaching grammar can incorporate game elements to make grammar lessons more engaging. When learners are given opportunities to experience varied learning activities emotionally, they are often believed to learn English grammar in ways that are both purposeful and enjoyable.

V. BENEFITS OF GAMIFICATION IN ADULT LEARNERS' ENGLISH GRAMMAR LEARNING

5.1. Enhancement of learners' emotional engagement

Gamified learning platforms such as Quizizz, Kahoot!, and Wordwall are often designed with colourful interfaces, visual features, and audio effects which may attract learners' attention and increase their engagement with learning tasks (Ding et al., 2018). The combination of audiovisual features and a competitive learning environment may also encourage learners to participate more actively and perform tasks better (Trowler, 2010). In addition to these features, many gamified platforms provide learners with opportunities for personalisation. For example, Kahoot! allows learners to choose their own nicknames and personalise their avatars. Such features may create a sense of novelty and make learning experiences different from conventional paper-based activities. Similarly, Wordwall offers a variety of interactive task formats, such as multiple-choice questions, matching activities, and drag-and-drop tasks, allowing the same grammar content to be presented through different types of activities.

Furthermore, when grammar content is presented through a gamified learning platform, it can often be organised into smaller tasks or short quizzes. As a result, learners may perceive grammar practice as a series of achievable challenges rather than a lengthy and demanding task. The gradual completion of these challenges may contribute to learners' sense of competence and achievement.

Traditionally, learners may spend time completing exercises before their answers are checked and marked. However, in gamified activities, learners can complete online quizzes and receive immediate feedback as well as points for correct responses. The number of points awarded is determined not only by the accuracy of learners' answers but also by the speed with which they respond. Time limits can function as a form of challenge (Fredricks et al., 2004), encouraging learners to concentrate on tasks and process information. Successfully completing such challenges may contribute to their sense of competence and achievement.

Elements of points and leaderboards make learners' performance visible in relation to that of others. From the perspective of social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954), individuals tend to compare themselves with others in competition. Both types of students who are in higher and lower positions may be motivated to improve their performance in subsequent activities. As a result, they may get involved better in the process of cognitive development by digging deeper into the knowledge.

5.2. Enhancement of learners' cognitive engagement

Learners take part in the process of cognitive development at different stages. Before class, they preview materials and ask teachers or their peers for explanation of the parts they do not understand so that they can prepare well before doing gamified activities in class. This helps to develop their greater autonomy. During the game, the desire to achieve a higher place on the leaderboard may also motivate learners to apply and adjust suitable strategies to complete tasks successfully. After the game, cognitive engagement takes place when they reflect on their learning activities with their teachers. So gamification is not merely a game to play but also a playful learning experience (Dehganzadeh & Dehganzadeh, 2020; Zhang & Yu, 2021).

VI. CHALLENGES OF GAMIFICATION IN ADULT LEARNERS' ENGLISH GRAMMAR LEARNING

6.1. Psychological pressure among learners

While some learners may view the feature of competition in gamified activities as a source of motivation to study more actively, this may also cause pressure or anxiety for those who are not interested in competing or perceive themselves as less capable of learning languages. Due to their fear of making mistakes and showing themselves, they may feel uncomfortable when their performance is displayed in front of the whole class. Some learners may experience even great stress when they find it difficult to catch up with the general pace of the class, which may further undermine their confidence.

6.2. Technological challenges

Because gamification involves the use of technology, particularly online interactive platforms, the lack of Internet connection sometimes poses a significant challenge to learners' completion of learning tasks. The use of gamification in classrooms requires participants to be adequately prepared in terms of devices and stable Internet connection so that all learners can have equal opportunities to participate in learning activities.

6.3. Limitations in ensuring grammar knowledge acquisition

It is argued that the use of gamification in English grammar classes does not necessarily ensure effective learning in the long term, particularly when learners are preparing for English examinations (Domínguez et al., 2013). Exam preparation often requires learners to engage in intensive learning and deliberate practice of examination skills, such as time management, time allocation, and the use of appropriate strategies for dealing with different types of test questions. In contrast, turning learning tasks into games may help learners feel more relaxed and engaged, potentially leading to better short-term performance. However, whether gamification can effectively support the intensive learning and sustained practice required for examination preparation remains questionable.

VII. PROPOSED PEDAGOGICAL PRINCIPLES

First, when it comes to task design, teachers should select question types that are aligned with the learning objectives to ensure that learners practise the target knowledge and finally are able to understand, remember, and use grammatical structures accurately. In addition, teachers need to consider the diversity of learners' learning styles and preferences when designing and implementing gamified learning tasks. Particularly, teachers should avoid creating questions that are too long or too challenging in relation to the time available. This can help ensure that gamification functions as a tool for facilitating learners' motivation and engagement rather than creating unnecessary pressure or anxiety.

Second, teachers should combine individual and team modes on gamified learning platforms. This can provide learners with opportunities to develop their problem-solving skills independently and engage in cognitive processes while they are also allowed to enhance their teamwork skills. Team-based activities may additionally help reduce pressure and anxiety by creating a shared sense of achievement.

Third, it should be noted that the ultimate purpose of learning is not simply to enjoy the game but to acquire and develop knowledge. Therefore, teachers should include opportunities for discussion and reflection after each gamified activity to ensure that learners understand the target knowledge, recognise why particular answers are correct or incorrect, and learn from their mistakes. Besides, teachers need to facilitate the learning process so that both objectives can be achieved: creating an enjoyable and playful learning experience while ensuring meaningful knowledge acquisition. Without appropriate guidance, some learners may focus primarily on

winning the game, earning points, or achieving a high position on the leaderboard without fully understanding the learning objectives underlying the activities.

Fourth, teachers should utilise gamified learning platforms both inside and outside the classroom so that learners have opportunities to engage in independent learning at home through homework assignments or additional practice activities. By extending gamified learning beyond the classroom, learners can access learning activities anytime and anywhere according to their individual needs and preferences. They may also choose interactive learning experiences that suit their interests and learn at their own pace. In this way, gamified platforms can provide greater flexibility and support the development of learner autonomy (Zou, 2020).

VIII. CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of adult learners' characteristics and the features of gamification, this paper suggests that the use of gamification has the potential to bring learners more enjoyable learning experience while supporting their acquisition of grammar knowledge when appropriate pedagogical principles are implemented. However, further empirical studies need to be conducted to validate the proposed principles and strengthen the theoretical arguments presented in this paper, contributing to the research field of teaching English grammar to adult learners.

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