Gamification as a Tool to Enhance Speaking Confidence in Students

La gamificación como herramienta para aumentar la confianza en la expresión oral de los estudiantes

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this particular research is to investigate the influence of gamification via a reward system on speaking confidence of the eighth-grade English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners at Unidad Educativa Selva Alegre. The study was based on a mixed-methods research design that integrated both quantitative and qualitative data collected by means of pre- and post-tests, Likert-scale surveys, and classroom observations during a four-week intervention. The gamified activities consisted of group challenges, quizzes, and interactive speaking tasks in which student got rewards based on their active participation. Descriptive statistics were utilized to reveal the numerical shifts in the performance of the students, whereas the thematic analysis was adopted to interpret the behaviors that were observable. It was found from the results that after the implementation, the students declared higher levels of motivation and confidence, lower nervousness, and larger readiness to take part in English-speaking tasks. The classroom observations agreed with the gradual improvements in fluency, body language, and engagement. The conclusions state that the adoption of gamified reward systems can contribute to the creation of a positive learning atmosphere which aids the students in getting rid of their anxiety and speaking more assertively in English.

Keywords: Gamification, reward system, speaking, confidence

RESUMEN

El objetivo de esta investigación es analizar la influencia de la gamificación mediante un sistema de recompensas en la confianza al hablar de los estudiantes de octavo grado de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) de la Unidad Educativa Selva Alegre. El estudio se basó en un diseño de investigación de métodos mixtos que integró datos cuantitativos y cualitativos recopilados a través de pruebas pre y post, encuestas tipo Likert y observaciones de aula durante una intervención de cuatro semanas. Las actividades gamificadas consistieron en desafíos grupales, cuestionarios y tareas interactivas de expresión oral en las que los estudiantes recibieron recompensas basadas en su participación activa. Se utilizaron estadísticas descriptivas para evidenciar los cambios numéricos en el desempeño de los estudiantes, mientras que el análisis temático se aplicó para interpretar los comportamientos observables. Los resultados mostraron que, después de la implementación, los estudiantes manifestaron mayores niveles de motivación y confianza, menor nerviosismo y una mayor disposición para participar en actividades orales en inglés. Las observaciones de aula coincidieron con mejoras graduales en la fluidez, el lenguaje corporal y la participación. Las conclusiones señalan que la adopción de sistemas de recompensas gamificados puede contribuir a la creación de un ambiente de aprendizaje positivo que ayude a los estudiantes a superar la ansiedad y a expresarse con mayor seguridad en inglés.

Palabras clave: gamificación, sistema de recompensas, expresión oral, confianza

INTRODUCTION

Due to globalization, English has become an international language, connecting people worldwide. According to Ilyosovna (2020), around 67 countries recognize English as their official language, while 27 other countries have adopted it as their official second language. In Ecuador, English is not considered as an official second language; however, the government recognizes the relevance of mastering this language for students' academic and professional development.

Since 2016, Ecuador has included English as a mandatory subject from primary to secondary school. Based on this, the government implemented the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Curriculum, which establishes that when students finish secondary education, they should achieve a B1 level of English proficiency according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Ministerio de Educación del Ecuador , 2016). Despite government efforts to promote English acquisition, the well-known educational company 'Education First (EF)' ranked Ecuador 82nd out of 116 in English proficiency worldwide (Education First, 2025). Based on that, it is necessary to improve in teaching strategies, students' performance, and educational interventions.

In order to master English as a Second Language, students should develop the four macro skills, which are divided into receptive skills (listening and reading) and productive skills (speaking and writing). Receptive skills do not require students to use the language; they only involve receiving and understanding it. In contrast, productive skills require students to start transmitting information using language (Masduqi, 2016). Furthermore, Golkva and Hubackova (2014) mention that exists a correlation between receptive and productive skills; they cannot exist independently since they mutually support each other. Nevertheless, speaking skills are considered as one of the most important skills to develop for students since they play a paramount role in communication (Richards, 2008).

According to Brown (2001), speaking is a process that needs individuals' interactions to construct meaning by producing, receiving, and processing information. Additionally, Nunan (2003) mentions that speaking involves using language quickly and confidently, with minimal awkward pauses. Furthermore, Burns and Joyce (1997) establish that speaking is spontaneous since it demands that both speaker and listener interact in real-time and stay coherent and fluent. For those reasons, speaking is crucial in communication since it permits people to express ideas and feelings, and share information.

Chaney and Burk (1998) stated that speaking creates and exchanges meaning using verbal and non-verbal symbols. For Hybels and Weaver (2001), speaking involves articulating words and sounds to convey meaning, express opinions and emotions, or inform others. Despite the importance of speaking skills, many learners consider it one of the most challenging skills to

acquire due to students' need to communicate in real-time; this process requires rapid processing (Harmer, 2007).

Teaching and learning speaking skills in an EFL context can be challenging due to factors such as shyness, limited vocabulary, low motivation, and fear of making mistakes (Asnaini et al., 2025). These challenges often contribute to students' lack of confidence in speaking in English. According to Ork et al. (2024), lack of confidence is one of the primary problems that hinders students' speaking performance. Moreover, Ur (1996) explains that students' fear of making mistakes can inhibit their confidence in class participation. Furthermore, Leonita et al. (2023) establish that students can become fluent in English if teachers help them build their confidence.

For those reasons, teaching Speaking Skills in EFL classrooms is a significant challenge for teachers, who must employ innovative and effective methods that promote student interactions and engagement. Bygate (1987) mentions that students' success in using the language depends on the teacher's performance. In recent years, innovative teaching methods that actively engaged students are gradually replacing traditional approaches. One example is gamification, which incorporates game attributes to the learning process to enhance motivation and participation (Deterdinget et al., 2011).

Gamification can be defined as using game-based elements and principles in situations that are unrelated to games, such as teaching-learning process. According to Zicherman and Cunningham (2011), gamification applies game mechanics, dynamics, and frameworks in non-game settings to promote people's engagement with complex tasks. Werbach and Hunter (2012) identify some game mechanics: challenges, competitions, cooperation, feedback, rewards, and win state. Gamification promotes the learning process since it is based on educational psychology, and teachers have used some techniques, like assigning points for activities for years (Kapp, 2012).

One of the most interesting gamification mechanics applied in education is the reward system, which can increase students' motivation to participate in speaking activities. For Chen (2023), a reward system is beneficial not only for students' development and growth, promoting learning habits, but also for reaching their potential, helping them to overcome motivational difficulties. According to Mala et al. (2024), developing listening and speaking skill motivation plays a paramount role in language learning since it encourages learners to engage and participate in communicative activities. Moreover, Su and Cheng (2015) mention that using game mechanics like a reward system creates an enjoyable and safe learning environment where students feel confident to speak without fear.

For the purpose of directing the investigation and clarifying the research path, the current study tries to assess the effect of a gamified reward system on the speaking confidence and participation of students in EFL classes. The specific objectives of the study are: (1) to identify how gamified speaking activities influence students' oral participation and self-confidence

through an observation checklist based on criteria such as willingness to speak, fluency, use of expressions, risk-taking, body language, and engagement; and (2) to explore how students' attitudes and perceptions toward gamified speaking tasks contribute to the development of their speaking confidence through the application of a Likert-scale survey. These objectives set the base for the analysis of the connection between gamification and speaking performance, at the same time, they define the study's goals from the viewpoint of process-oriented learning.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study aims to analyze the impact of using gamification through a reward system on students' speaking confidence in an EFL classroom. This research employed a mixed-methods approach, collecting both qualitative and quantitative data. Creswell (2014) argues that using a mixed-method provides a more accurate understanding of the research problem and offers a more comprehensible interpretation for data triangulation of the results by integrating numerical data with participants' experiences. Besides, the study aligns with the convergent parallel design since quantitative and qualitative data were collected at the same time.

Data collected were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Descriptive statistics like means and percentages have been used to compare pre- and post-test scores and survey responses, providing a numerical representation of the students' improvement. Meanwhile, qualitative data obtained from classroom observations were used to determine relationships among students' confidence and speaking participation. Combining both statistical and thematic analysis would better explain the impact of the reward system.

The researcher followed ethical considerations throughout the entire research process to ensure transparency and respect toward students. Plus, the study was initiated after receiving permission from students and their parents for data collection. Additionally, participants were advised that their responses would be confidential and used only for research purpose. Moreover, the intervention activities were designed to ensure students' confidence to speak in a supportive environment.

Furthermore, the validated and clarified the instruments to collect data in order to obtain reliable data. An experienced English teacher who has a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in education reviewed and approved the instruments, which included a Likert-scale survey, an observation checklist, and speaking rubric. This process of validation played a significant role in confirming the suitability of the items, the precision of the indicators, and the consistency of the instruments with the study's objectives. Besides the expert's feedback, the minor changes in wording and structure that were made were for the purpose of enhancing the precision and comprehension of the tools before they were finally implemented.

This research was conducted with eighth-grade students at Unidad Educativa Selva Alegre, involving twenty-four participants. A control group was not used because the data were

collected using a census-based approach, as the group had fewer than 30 participants (Salkind, 2010). The research instruments for this study included Likert-scale surveys, classroom observation, and a pre-post test. All participants took part in every data collection activity.

The research procedure was divided into four stages: (1) introduction of the reward system, (2) administration of the pre-test and pre-Likert-scale survey, (3) four weeks of intervention (three instructional hours per week) in which students were exposed to gamified activities such as quizzes, group challenges, interactive tasks, where students earned a reward for participate by speaking actively, and (4) administration of the post-test and post-survey. Across the four weeks intervention (three instructional hours per week), instruments were administered on student's regular schedule: pre-test and pre-survey in Week 0; weekly observation checklists in Weeks 1–4; and post-test with post-survey in Week 4.

During the entire intervention period, students were evaluated using a classroom observation checklist, which assessed their fluency, pronunciation, grammatical accuracy, vocabulary usage and speaking confidence. By means of this organized sequence, the investigator was capable of taking measurements in terms of participation and confidence changes of the students, thereby combining the observable outcomes with the students' self-reported experiences for a detailed comprehension of the phenomenon.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the obtained results from the intervention period which consisted in the pre-test and post-test, classroom observations, and Likert-scale surveys. The outcomes are organized according to the two main variables of this study: student's speaking confidence and participation during the EFL classes.

The analysis of the pre- and post-survey indicated an improvement in students' confidence and motivation to speaking English after the implementation of the reward system. The table below shows that 75% of the students expressed high levels of nervousness and low motivation to participate in speaking activities, while only 20.8% expressed the same feeling after the intervention. Furthermore, students who felt motivated to speak in English increased from 8.3% to 62.5%. Likewise, the percentage of students who felt confident to participate in English speaking activities rose from 12.5% to 75%. These results suggest that using both a reward system and gamified activities reduced students' anxiety. Therefore, learners felt more confidante and encouraged to speak English during their classes.

Table 1

Pre- and Post-Intervention Results of the Likert Scale Survey on Students' Speaking Attitudes

Evaluated Criteria	Pre-Likert Scale Survey			Post-Likert Scale Survey		
	Frequency	Results	Total	Frequency	Results	Total
I usually feel nervous when I have to speak English in class.						
Strongly Agree	12	50%		2	8.33%	
Agree	6	25%		4	16.67%	
Neutral	1	4.17%	100%	1	4.17%	100%
Disagree	4	16.67%		9	37.50%	
Strongly Disagree	1	4.17%		8	33.33%	
I feel motivated to speak English during regular class activities.						
Strongly Agree	0	0%		4	16.67%	
Agree	2	8.33%		11	45.83%	
Neutral	4	16.67%	100%	5	20.83%	100%
Disagree	8	33.33%		2	8.33%	
Strongly Disagree	10	41.67%		2	8.33%	
I feel confident when participating in English speaking tasks.						
Strongly Agree	0	0%		4	16.67%	
Agree	3	12.50%		14	58.33%	
Neutral	3	12.50%	100%	3	12.50%	100%
Disagree	6	25%		3	12.50%	
Strongly Disagree	12	50%		0	0%	
Speaking activities in English class are enjoyable and not stressful.						
Strongly Agree	0	0%		6	25%	
Agree	2	8.33%		14	58.33%	
Neutral	3	12.50%	100%	2	8.33%	100%
Disagree	11	45.83%		1	4.17%	
Strongly Disagree	8	33.33%		1	4.17%	
I try hard to participate in English speaking tasks even without incentives.						
Strongly Agree	1	4.17%		16	66.67%	
Agree	0	0%		4	16.67%	
Neutral	1	4.17%	100%	1	4.17%	100%
Disagree	9	37.50%		0	0%	
Strongly Disagree	13	54.17%		3	12.50%	
I believe my speaking skills are improving in regular classroom activities.						

Strongly Agree	1	4.17%		5	20.83%	
Agree	2	8.33%		16	66.67%	
Neutral	3	12.50%	100%	1	4.17%	100%
Disagree	10	41.67%		1	4.17%	
Strongly Disagree	8	33.33%		1	4.17%	

Some types of speaking activities make me feel more motivated than others.

Strongly Agree	8	33.33%		10	41.67%	
Agree	3	12.50%		7	29.17%	
Neutral	4	16.67%	100%	6	25%	100%
Disagree	7	29.17%		0	0%	
Strongly Disagree	2	8.33%		1	4.17%	

I would like to suggest new activities to make speaking class more interesting.

Strongly Agree	0	0%		5	20.83%	
Agree	1	4.17%		14	58.33%	
Neutral	1	4.17%	100%	1	4.17%	100%
Disagree	13	54.17%		2	8.33%	
Strongly Disagree	9	37.50%		2	8.33%	

I feel less afraid of making mistakes when speaking in English class.

Strongly Agree	0	0%		8	33.33%	
Agree	5	20.83%		12	50%	
Neutral	3	12.50%	100%	2	8.33%	100%
Disagree	6	25%		1	4.17%	
Strongly Disagree	10	41.67%		1	4.17%	

I usually speak actively in class during normal speaking activities.

Strongly Agree	1	4.17%		7	29.17%	
Agree	4	16.67%		10	41.67%	
Neutral	3	12.50%	100%	4	16.67%	100%
Disagree	12	50%		2	8.33%	
Strongly Disagree	4	16.67%		1	4.17%	

Note: This table was developed by the researcher to compare students' pre- and post-Likert scale scores.

The following table (table 2) shows how students' speaking performance improved during the implementation of the gamified reward system. The overall mean increased from 2.61 in the pre-test to 3.48 in the post-test, pointing out an improvement of 0.87 points. Moreover, students' confidence (+1.3) and fluency (+1.0) revealed the highest improvement, suggesting that a reword system encouraged students to speak English with more freedom and more confidence. Additionally, students demonstrated better control of the language since the grammatical accuracy

increased by 0.9 points. Consequently, it can be concluded that the intervention of a reward system not only improved language performance but also encouraged students to participate actively in speaking tasks.

Table 2

Students' Progress in Speaking Skills Based on Pre- and Post-Test Results

Criteria	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Improvement
Fluency	2.5	3.5	1.0
Pronunciation	2.9	3.5	0.6
Grammar	2.7	3.5	0.9
Vocabulary	2.7	3.3	0.6
Confidence	2.3	3.6	1.3
Overall Mean	2.61	3.48	0.87

Note: This table was developed by the researcher to compare students' pre- and post-test mean scores.

The observation summary in table 3 supports the quantitative findings obtained from the pre- and post-test results. Although all 24 students participated in the intervention, only five students were randomly selected to observed their improvement over four weeks of using gamified activities that implemented a reward system to encourage them to speak confidently in English. The observation of the five students sample revealed progressive improvement in speaking performance. At the beginning, students showed little willingness to speak; however, by the end of the fourth week participants demonstrated greater motivation to participate, reduced anxiety, and improved fluency, although not all reached full proficiency.

In the checklist, ✓ denotes that a behavior was observed, **O** signifies that it was occasionally observed, and ✗ indicates that it was not observed. This step-by-step transformation from ✗ to ✓ emphasizes the positive effect of using rewards to motivate learners. The results imply that a reward-based system, although not being able to transform all students right away, is able to build a supporting atmosphere for participation and speaking confidence in EFL classrooms which would last for quite some time.

Table 3
Observation of Sample Students' Speaking Performance (5 Students, 4 Weeks)

Criteria	Week 1 ✓	Week 2 ✓	Week 3 ✓	Week 4 ✓
1. Volunteering to speak	10%	30%	50%	70%
2. Active participation	20%	40%	60%	70%
3. Confidence / eye contact	0%	20%	50%	60%
4. Attempting speech even if unsure	10%	30%	60%	70%
5. Positive attitude / enjoyment	20%	50%	60%	80%

6. Responding with fluency	10%	30%	50%	70%
7. Using full sentences	10%	30%	60%	70%
8. Improvement with rewards visible	10%	40%	60%	80%
9. Collaboration / helping peers	0%	20%	40%	60%
10. Reduction in hesitation / anxiety	10%	30%	60%	70%

Note: Percentages represent the proportion of the 5-student sample who consistently demonstrated the behavior (✓)

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the impact of gamification through a reward system on enhancing speaking confidence in EFL eighth-grade students. After the intervention, findings revealed that students demonstrated a significant improvement in students' confidence and participation in speaking activities. Data collected from pre- and post-tests, Likert-scale, and classroom observations indicated that students feel less anxious, more motivated, and more willing to express themselves in English, suggesting that gamified activities focus on a reward system fostered students' confidence to participate in oral communication activities.

Regarding the first specific objective, the observation classroom checklist demonstrated a progressive improvement in students' willingness to speak, fluency, and body language, confirming that using a reward system had a positive influence on students' oral participation and self-confidence. On the other hand, in relation to the second specific objective, Likert-surveys results showed a remarkable increase in students' motivation and confidence when they participated in English speaking tasks.

Therefore, it can be established that the application of gamification, specifically a reward system for motivated students to participate during speaking activities could be an effective pedagogical strategy to fortify students' confidence and engagement in EFL speaking context. Nevertheless, this study was limited by its small among of participants, short duration of intervention and lack of a control group. However, future research should extend the intervention period and include a bigger range of participants gain to a deeper understanding of gamification's long-term effects on speaking confidence and language learning.

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