

ENHANCING LEARNER ENGAGEMENT IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS THROUGH GAMIFICATION

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Abstract: Learning a foreign language is always a new experience for its learners but sustaining the enthusiasm and motivation to gain proficiency in the new language is always a challenging task for the learners. The attitude of 'I-can-Google-out-everything-I-want' reduces their attention rate in the classroom and the teacher is then under a constant look out for innovative and engaging techniques to garner the interest of the learners. Gamification in education is a relatively new concept that promises optimum learner engagement and experiential learning. Can our traditional teaching-learning process be gamified? What are the gaming techniques that can be effectively used in a foreign language classroom? What would be the pros and cons of gamifying the class? This paper attempts to address these questions based on a classroom action research done in the beginner level German class in a private technical university and it is observed that gamifying a session enhances learner engagement in class and with peers and with the activity as such. This not only blends learning with technology but also creates a ubiquitous environment for learning beyond classrooms. The techniques discussed here could be employed in any classroom to make the teaching – learning process more meaningful and effective.

Keywords: Gamification, learning foreign languages, learner autonomy, learner engagement and motivation.

INTRODUCTION

The impact of Globalization and Internationalization of education is felt in every domain and as we move forward in the 21st century, foreign language learning is gaining new importance and foreign languages are now being taught right from school level to tertiary level, not to mention the advent of many private institutions and online courses to propagate learning of foreign languages. Whatever be the platform through which foreign languages are learned, it is certainly a fresh learning experience for its learners, but the challenge for its teachers will always be to garner the attention of the learners in every session and sustain their enthusiasm and motivation throughout the course.

Classrooms in India on an average still have 50 plus learners in them and effective learner engagement in every session is a big challenge to the teachers. Examinations and marks dominant evaluation system makes the teaching-learning process more content centric. Although language teachers put in their efforts to make the process of teaching-learning more practical than monotonous, livelier than the mundane routine, it is a fact that the teachers have to manage, innovate and create something new within the limitations of the time allocated for every session, assessments and other available infrastructural facilities.

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Despite the constraints, many teachers still continue to try and test various pedagogical methods in the classroom to motivate their learners and engage them in the process of learning. Be it the conventional methods like direct instruction or seatwork or written assignments to the modern methods like role-plays or quiz or group activities, pedagogical methods are constantly revamped for better results in the classroom.

Nevertheless the efforts of the teachers backfire many a time in class, as they do not match the learners' expectations from a classroom. The millennial learners sitting in our classes are digital natives, tech savvy and networking freaks who live in the world of 'Instagram' and 'WhatsApp'. Continuous engagement in a ubiquitous environment, instant gratification and anytime, anywhere availability of information are making them rethink about traditional classrooms and instructions. With the attitude of 'I-can-Google-out-everything-I-want' reducing their attention rate in the classroom, they rely more on self learning methods and internet for last minute preparations.

This puts the teachers in a tight corner as they have to tread all paths to go the extra mile to channelize their learning activities and fortify their engagement in class. A new concept that is being successfully implemented in industrial trainings and now even in education is the concept of gamification. Although gamification in education is relatively new a concept that promises optimum learner engagement and experiential learning in any classroom, optimum usage and utilization of the concept is yet to be popularized in the academia. In the light of this, through this paper, we aim to discuss more about gamification and answer the following questions:

1. What is gamification? Can our traditional teaching-learning process be gamified?
2. What are the gaming techniques that can be effectively used in a foreign language classroom?
3. What would be the pros and cons of gamifying the class?

With an example of how a classroom session was gamified in a Basic German class, we attempt to bring in a newer perspective to the conventional pedagogical methods.

Gamification

Werbach and Hunter (2012) define gamification as 'the use of game elements and game design techniques in non-game contexts'. Gabe Zichermann (2010) defines gamification as "the process of using game thinking and mechanics to engage audiences and solve problems". Amy Jo Kim, as quoted in Kapp (2012) defines gamification as

“using game techniques to make activities more engaging and fun”. As Kapp (2012) also states gamification uses ‘game-based mechanics, aesthetics and game thinking to engage people, motivate action, promote learning and solve problems’.

Literature has many examples for how gamification has been implemented in various fields and one such example is that of a town, where the subway stairs were converted into a set of black and white piano keys, which makes music when you climb on them. This increased the number of commuters using the stairs by 66% and a change in the general behaviour of the commuters to take the stairs and not the regular elevators to exit the subway station. Another example is that of a fitness app called “Zombies, Run!” that encourages people to run. Apart from tracking the usual data like the running time, number of miles completed, pacing etc, it also engages the players in an interactive game of running and collecting key items for the home base. By giving a creative twist to the otherwise mundane a job, the main objective of gamification is to create a system where in the learners / players actively participate in an abstract challenge, based on rules and regulations, interactivity and constant feedback to bring in the desired learning outcome.

Designing the activities with the help of game mechanics like points/badges, rewards or timed challenges is not enough to garner the learners’ attention to the task; equally significant would be the overall experience of taking part in the game, rethinking and redesigning of everyday experiences into an engaging activity that involves the learners in its process.

It can be deduced from these that gamification is ‘a careful and considered application of game thinking to solving problems and encouraging learning using all the elements of games that are appropriate’, Kapp (2012).

Gamifying the teaching-learning process

Every learner in a language classroom has an intrinsic motivation of learning the language and augmenting the learning sessions with game mechanics can bring in the extrinsic motivation required to engage and complete the task in order to learn the underlying concepts.

Given below is an example of how a session of a Basic German class was gamified and the observations made as to map out the impact of gamification on learners’ engagement in the class activities and the learning of the concepts.

In the private technical University where this study was conducted, the Basic German classroom is a heterogeneous mix of learners from different schools of engineering and different parts of India. They are all mostly first year students

of undergraduate engineering programmes, who have chosen to learn German as a foreign language among the basket of foreign languages offered like French, Spanish, Chinese and Japanese. The Basic German course is a 2 credit course with 30 hours of classroom instruction in a semester, with 2 classes of 50 minutes each in a week.

One of the difficult things in German is to understand and remember the ‘definite articles’, since all the singular nouns in German are classified either as ‘der’ (masculine) or ‘die’ (feminine) or ‘das’ (neutral). Apart from learning new words with their corresponding article in German, they should also learn and remember their plural forms because even the plurals have no uniformity in their formation. (In English you just add a[’s’] to make the plural form for most of the nouns: book-books / pen-pens)

Rote learning the big list of words is the only technique and working with a large group in a fixed classroom within a set time period calls for the conventional way of teacher introducing the vocabulary, the learners noting them down, followed by solving book back exercises / pattern drill etc... In such a scenario, the learners are certainly passive, with very few showing interest in solving the exercises and many relying on the answer keys for their last minute preparation for the examinations. To bring in a change to this pattern and to get the students to do some action for active learning, a session was gamified with an objective of making the learners work progressively to learn and understand the usage of definite articles and plural forms. In the previous class they were taught a set of 30 words related to the theme ‘Schulsachen’ (School things)

The table below explains in detail how the session was conducted.

TABLE 1: THE GAMIFIED SESSION – A SKETCH

| <i>Description / Levels</i> | <i>Level 0</i> | <i>Level 1</i> | <i>Level 2</i> | <i>Level 3</i> |
|-----------------------------|--|---|--|--|
| Learning Objective | Greeting and setting the tone for the activities | Play the first level game – “Pics and Words” Recollect the previously learnt words | Play the second level game – “Place them Out” Practice the vocabulary to understand the gender classification | Play the second level game – “Pick it up” Remember and connect the words to the objects |

| <i>Description / Levels</i> | <i>Level 0</i> | <i>Level 1</i> | <i>Level 2</i> | <i>Level 3</i> |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|--|--|
| Learners (Ls) or Teacher (T) activity | As the Ls assembled in the classroom, PPT saying “Cross the 3P’s to learn these” was projected. The T told the Ls that they are playing a game of crossing the 3 P’s to learn articles and nouns and their plural forms. | T distributed cards to each team which had 20 words in German from the theme “Schulsachen”(School things) T then projected pictures of 15 objects in a slide for just 30 seconds during which Ls were asked to observe the objects and remember as many of them. After 30 seconds, the slide was made blank and the Ls were asked to name the objects they have seen in German (in 3 minutes time), discussing in the group and with the help of the cards given. | Within the team, the Ls were asked to pair up and each pair was given a sheet with 3 columns labeled ‘der, die and das’. A set of 20 pictures were shown by the T in quick progression and the Ls had to write the correct word under the corresponding column. (Ex: a picture of pen was shown, Ls wrote Kuli under the der column) Once all the pictures were shown, a minute was given to Ls to finalize their list and the answers were discussed. | Every team was asked to nominate a member for this game and all these nominated Ls stood around the table set up by the T. The T had put physical objects corresponding to the vocabulary list being learned and the task was to pick up the right object that is being called out by the T. (Ex: note book, pen, pencil etc were put on the table. When T called out ‘der Kuli’ (pen) the Ls had to quickly pick the pen from the table. If some Ls picked up a wrong object, a small sticker was stuck on his/her hand. The level is completed once all the objects are picked by the Ls. |
| Social Forms | Whole class | Group work | Pair work | Individual |

| <i>Description / Levels</i> | <i>Level 0</i> | <i>Level 1</i> | <i>Level 2</i> | <i>Level 3</i> |
|-----------------------------|--|---|--|--|
| Materials / Media required | PPT slide, projector, laptop/Desktop | Cards with words Corresponding pictures | Sheet of paper with 3 columns Corresponding pictures | Objects related to the theme of "Schulsachen" (School things) |
| Methodological notes | The Ls were curious to know what it was and it amplified their curiosity and interest | Ls cognitive skills were tested and the cards with the answers gave them the scaffolding required to remember the previously learnt new words. Discussing and working in the group enhanced the opportunity of jotting down more objects collectively. | In the previous level they had a help card with the words and article already given on them, but here Ls had to recollect from memory and fill the table. Working in pairs gave all the Ls equal opportunity to think and learn the words. | Associating the German word called out to its correct object reinforces their understanding of the words and the article |
| After Notes | T divided the entire class into 10 groups with 6 Ls in a group and put up a Leader board with 10 teams marked on them. | If any team completed the task within 3 minutes, leader board was updated by the T with 100 points. The answers were discussed with the PPT and the teams evaluated their answers. Team score = number of correct answers * 100 points Leader board was updated with team scores. The help cards distributed earlier was collected back and the next level was introduced | Every correct answer fetched 10 points for the pair and then the teams score was calculated by adding all the pairs' score together and leader board was updated. T then set the next game. | Individual score = No. of Objects * 100 points minus 100 points for every sticker stuck. Individual score is then updated in the Leader board under the corresponding teams. Final scores were computed and the team with the highest score was identified. |
| Time required | 5 minutes | 10 minutes | 15 minutes | 15 minutes |

The entire activity took 45 minutes and the T wrapped up the session by applauding for the team with the highest score and introduced a challenge round also for the Ls that would fetch them additional points.

The challenge was to take the quiz put up in MOODLE, a learning management system used in the university. The quiz had more exercises like match the following pictures with the words, fill in the blanks with the right article and edit the errors with an extended set of vocabulary than what was dealt with in the class. It also had a 'web quest' activity to learn the plural forms for the singular nouns learned, wherein the Ls had to use online dictionaries / resources to search for the plural of the given noun and fill it up in the quiz to finish the activity.

The quiz could be taken multiple times by a learner at anytime and anywhere from the campus. Since within the class time of 50 minutes, only few words could be taught, along with the words taught in class, new words were also introduced to the learners in the quiz, which would enrich their vocabulary and would also be a ready reckoner for them for further studies. Since new words were introduced, learners might have to take multiple attempts to secure full marks in the quiz and it was told that individual marks secured would be added to the team and learners who secure full marks in the quiz would be given a bonus of 1000 points. The quiz had to be completed before the next class for computing the scores but within the interim period it could be taken anytime they want. Individuals who fail to take the test will have 500 points deducted from their teams score too. All this was quickly briefed to the Ls by the T and the class dispersed to meet up in the next session the next week.

OBSERVATIONS

It was seen that kindling a curiosity amidst learners, right at the beginning of the class had a positive effect on the learners as they were seen chatting excitedly with their partners as to what it could be. This naturally set the tone for the class and the ensuing activities that were planned. In level 1, working in a group with the help card, learners were seen raking their brains to recollect the object seen in the PPT and the help card helped them to recollect or guess the right word in German. It was also observed that a few learners in the group remained non committed or uninterested in the task. But since level 2 was made a pair work, the number of learners thinking and contributing to the task was more and as the T knew the Ls well, a little shuffling of partners enabled slow learners to work with a good learner, thereby the Ls passively picked up a few words in the process. By now the Leader Boards gave the class a view of their scores and the class was excited to see how it progressed. In third level, as only one person was asked to come to the table, representing the team, the team determined 'bright' person got nominated and the till then relatively a silent class got noisy, with the team members prompting the

English equivalent for the German words called out by the T. There were lot of movements and shuffling near the table as 10 people tried to pick the objects from the table, but sticking of stickers in the hand of a few (when a wrong object was picked) came as a surprise to them. Negative points was not mentioned during the game and later when it was told while calculating scores, it brought out a ‘ Oh, No!’ emotion from the teams that lost their points. Learners were seen chiding their nominees for being in haste and for not listening to their promptings. The overall oral feedback from the learners was very affirmative and their body language and big smiles conveyed the message clearly that they enjoyed the session. While dispersing from the class, learners were seen discussing about finishing the MOODLE Quiz and telling their team members to finish it with full marks so as to increase the scores for their team. A few interested learners also checked with the T if the leader board will be brought to the next class and if the game would be continued.

Pros and Cons

The interest and curiosity of learners were increased and active participation of learners was observed during the games. Working in groups and in pairs gives the learners the platform to learn together and learn from one another too. Their team playing spirit is also fortified by the subtle competition that the Leader board brings into the game. Finishing the task within the stipulated time and together as emphasized through the MOODLE challenge and other games teaches them strategies like effective time management, communication between team members, delegation of work and use of online tools for self learning. The learners’ ability to assimilate the game, planning its execution within the team and finishing the task within the given time successfully are also the positives of gamifying the session.

However, it has its own challenges - like it is a time consuming process for the teacher as it calls for a detailed planning and arrangement of required materials. In large group classrooms, the slow learners and introverts might be left out by the dominating learners and extroverts and again the discretion of the teacher in grouping the teams is required to bring in a good mix of learners in a team. The classroom can become very noisy and boisterous at times, and it requires smart and effective techniques from the teacher to control / manage the class. Since the classroom session is only for 50 minutes, completion of planned games within its own time period is a big challenge as any disturbance can cause delay in its execution. It calls for the teachers’ presence of mind to handle such situations and it takes time to get all the Ls to adapt to an active learning environment and solicit their cooperation to complete the tasks.

The whole process of gamification calls for equal involvement from both the teacher and the learners thus becoming both a teacher-learner centered approach to classroom instructions. Such a cooperative endeavour makes the teachers and the learners co-creators of the learning process.

Futuristic ideas

Further progress can be made in this, by developing an app or an application that can gamify the entire concept dealt, with the help and involvement of the students themselves. Considering the study was done in a technical university, a project could be given to interested students in this domain of app development / game design to conceptualize and execute a fully fledged game model for learning vocabulary in German at beginner level. Such a project would help build the technical acumen of the learners and will also open up newer avenues for extending the game to other concepts and themes.

CONCLUSION

Games certainly bring in learner involvement to the task in hand and introducing gaming elements like points, leader boards, surprises and challenges increases their engagement in class and with peers and the activity as such, thus transforming the otherwise passive a class to an active class in action and interaction and have made them learn and remember words and articles in the target language. Learners learn from each other and together in a healthy competitive setting. The MOODLE Quiz as part of a challenge in the game gives them the necessary impetus to revisit the learning components and also the facility of learning anytime, anywhere at one's pace. This extends learning beyond the confines of a classroom and the conventional models of learning are now blended to create a ubiquitous scenario. This also calls for teachers to plan their sessions in detail, envisage eventual hiccups, and execute the planning meticulously, all with a creative hat and effective classroom management techniques up their sleeves. Although simple gaming techniques were tried on an experimental level to see the degree of learner engagement in class, it has opened up a lot of creative and innovative ideas for forthcoming sessions also to be gamified. With this session as an example, gamification can be tried in any language classroom and also in core subject classrooms for bringing in a difference in the process of teaching and learning. With the will of the teachers to innovate and create a new learning experience for their learners, the sky is the limit for implementing various gaming techniques and appending them to suit the individual classrooms.

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