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English

Teaching of Technical English through Gamification

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ABSTRACT

Gamification is becoming an increasingly popular concept in teaching. Today's 'digital natives' have grown up with video and computer games, and they look for excitement. The fast pace of many games fits their short attention spans. The concept of "gamification" - using game elements in non-game contexts to motivate and persuade - is moving from marketing to teaching at great pace. While games have long been part of a language teacher's bag of tricks, teachers can benefit from learning about the elements of games that will help to appeal to today's learners. Teaching and Language Learning through Gamification (TLLG) aims to give educators the opportunity to investigate the potential of gamification of language learning and teacher development. This paper aims at looking at specific examples and contexts where gamification has been or can be used; using games inside and outside of the language classroom; and engaging in professional development through play. It also concentrates on the salient features of gamification other than providing fun and entertainment. The perfect harmonization of the spirit that is induced in the process of gamification with the theories propounded by D. Stephen Krashen in *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition:English Language Teaching series* is also scrutinized and studied in this paper.

KEYWORDS	Gamification; comprehensible input; 'trigger'; 'a low anxiety situation'; 'off the defensive'.

Introduction

"Games are a more natural way to learn than traditional classrooms. Not only have humans been learning by playing games since the beginning of our species, but intelligent animals have as well." (Aldrich, 5) This is where lies the root of the basic principle that underlies the spirit of 'Gamification' in true sense, and this basic principle readily concords with Stephen Krashen's views on 'comprehensible inputs' and creating of low anxiety situations in second language acquisition. According to Stephen Krashen, the supply of 'comprehensible input', in low anxiety situations, containing messages that harmoniously align with the tastes and interests of the students, really structures the best possible method for teaching and learning – " … improvement comes from supplying communicative and comprehensible input, and not from forcing and correcting production." (Krashen, 7) 'Gamification' easily provides all these requirements, namely low anxiety situations, communicative and comprehensible inputs and messages that students really want to hear. This becomes very clear from the very definition of 'Gamification' itself – "Gamification is the application of game elements in non-gaming situations, that is, to convert useful activities into games." (Lui, 91)

'Gamification' is becoming an increasingly popular concept in teaching. Today's digital natives have grown up with video and computer games, and they look for excitement. The fast pace of many games fits their short attention spans. The concept of 'Gamification' - using game elements in non-game contexts to motivate and persuade - is moving from marketing to teaching at great pace. While games have long been part of a language teachers' bag of tricks, teachers can benefit from learning about the elements of games that will help to appeal to today's learners. Teaching and Language Learning through Gamification (TLLG) aims to give educators the opportunity to investigate the potential of 'Gamification' of language learning and teacher development. This paper aims at looking at specific examples and contexts where 'Gamification' has been or can be used; using games inside and outside of the language classroom; and engaging in professional development through play for engineering students. It also concentrates on the salient features of 'Gamification' other than providing fun and entertainment. The perfect harmonization of the spirit that is induced in the process of 'Gamification' with the theories propounded by D. Stephen Krashen in *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition:English Language Teaching Series* is also scrutinized and studied in this paper.

Gamification and Motivation

Motivation is decisive in learning. If students are highly motivated in spite of their limited ability, motivation will help them to find the means to accomplish a task and eventually enhance the ability. However, motivation and ability alone are not enough. A 'trigger', which is like a call for action, is also required so as to tell the user to achieve a certain behavior. Software applications can serve as such 'trigger' to change people's attitudes and behavior. (Fogg, 2) 'Gamification' has been shown to engage and motivate learners when used properly in the classrooms which perfectly matches with Fogg's term 'trigger'. Its aim is to combine extrinsic and intrinsic motivations to raise the engagement of users by using game-like techniques such as scoreboards and personalized fast feedbacks, and thus, to motivate or influence their behaviour. Gamifying the classrooms increases students' motivation because when faced with a challenging task, they become fully engaged.

In order to make learning more engaging, gamifying techniques should be complete, interesting, easy to concentrate on, transparent with clear goals, followed by immediate feedbacks, vibrant enough to encourage deep but effortless involvement, effervescent to help learners exercise a sense of control over their actions, definite in concern for the disappearance of the self during the flow of gamified activities and appearance of a stronger sense of the self after the flow of such activities, and finally, be effectual in facilitating a healthy sense of time-management. (Jones, 4) Prensky summarizes this kind of experience as a state when the challenges presented and one's ability to solve them are almost perfectly matched, and when one often accomplishes things that one didn't think he/she could do along with a great deal of pleasure. (124) Malone and Csikszentmihalyi describe this flow of experience as the enjoyment of playing games. There can be enormous flow in work, sports, and even learning when concepts become clear and how to solve problems obvious. As such, 'Gamification', in this regard, helps learners learn better when they are participating and having fun. Graham Stanley defines 'Gamification' as the use of game design techniques to solve problems and engage audiences. (1) To him, this buzz word refers to adding a game layer to the real world. The basic premise of 'Gamification', according to him, is to make something one does or wants to do more engaging by turning it into a game.

Difference between Games, Game-based Learning and Gamification

Often 'Gamification' is confused with games and game-based learning. A close study of research articles shows that they all are quite different. Games are just for fun and may or may not have

defined rules and objectives whereas game-based learning incorporates games with defined objectives. 'Gamification' may just be a collection of tasks with points or some form of rewards where losing may or may not be possible because the point is to motivate people to take some action and do something. Winning and losing is a part of games, but in game-based learning, losing may or may not be possible (as it is in the case of 'Gamification' too) because the point is to learn as an end result, apart from motivating the participants. As far as games are concerned, the rewards are secondary and play comes first, and this brings a sharp distinction between games and the rest of the two categories. Intrinsic rewarding characterizes the game-based learning which remains optional in case of 'Gamification'. The main feature which distinguishes 'Gamification' from the other two is the sense of achievement a participant receives from the points/ rewards he or she is awarded with. As far as the content is concerned, stories/pictures/play items constitute the main focus in games whereas the content is morphed to fit the story and scenes of the games in game-based learning. A striking and contrasting feature that typifies 'Gamification' from the rest of the two categories is the game-like features that are added to the learning materials/systems rather than the main content. 'Gamification' is based on an idea called flow or the mental state of operation in which the person performing the activity is completely immersed with a feeling of energized focus and enjoyment in the process of doing that activity. 'Gamification' commonly employs game-design elements in non-game contexts such as awarding or recognizing a progressive or healthy behavior to improve user-engagement, organizational productivity, learning, crowd sourcing, employee recruitment, evaluation, etc.   The gamification techniques are intended to leverage people's natural desires for socializing, learning, mastery, competition, achievement, elevation of status, self-expression, etc. Early gamification strategies use rewards for players who accomplish desired tasks or design competitions to engage players. Types of rewards include points, achievement badges or levels, the filling of a progress bar, or providing the user with virtual currency. Making the rewards for accomplishing tasks visible to other players or providing leader boards are ways of encouraging players to compete. The main approach of 'Gamification' is to make existing tasks feel more like games. Some techniques used in this approach include adding meaningful choices, conditioning the level of challenges and designing interesting tasks.

Gamification for learning Technical and Business English
Technical and Business English can also be taught through 'Gamification' techniques. Keeping the spirit of 'Gamification', as seen in mock-parliament and mock-interview sessions, fictional organization within the college campus can be designed. The engineering students can be given mock-roles according to the hierarchical positions enjoyed in a real organization such as Chairman, Managing Director, Project Manager, Public Relation Officer, etc. They can be asked to execute the activities that normally take place in a real set-up such as board-meetings, writing project proposals, preparing project reports, writing formal letters for business transactions, etc. The language experts and experts from concerned fields can guide the students in these tasks. Before undertaking such tasks, a number of field trips to leading companies, factories and their main offices are recommended. While setting a fictional organization, help and guidance from experts from the respective fields can be sought. Relevant video and audio clippings can be utilized in the absence of such direct experiences. Before attempting to set a fictional organization at macro-level, minor tasks can be given to students at micro-level such as placing orders, accepting orders, advertising, drafting tenders, responding to tender notices, etc. Communication lab-sessions can be utilized for these micro-level activities. Assessment, acknowledgement and monitoring of such activities can be done by English professors of the college, experts from top level organizations, media-persons, etc. Such techniques not only develop the language skills but also soft skills along with life skills, encompassing joy, fun, sense of achievement, personality development and self-exploration. In other words, 'Gamification' engulfs an overall development within its vicinity.

Assessment of the performances of the students can be done as recommended by Graham Stanley in "Gamification and Language Learning", a document that was produced for the TESOL Electronic Village Online (EVO) 2012 session - 'Teaching and Learning Languages through Gamification' (http://tllg.wikispaces.com):
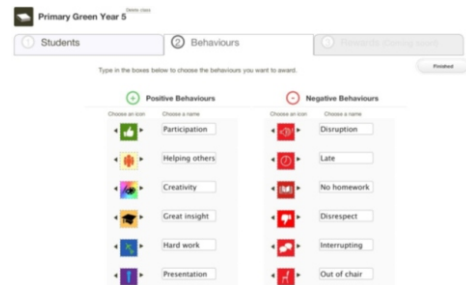
Such achievement tests harmoniously coincide with the process of evaluation suggested by Krashen as they record both positive as well as negative behaviours and at the same time, tempt the participants to clinch points through positive behaviours:

  Achievement tests ... preparation for the test, or studying for the test, should obviously encourage the student to do things that will provide more comprehensible input and the tools to gain even more input when the class is over. (Krashen, 178)

Moreover, this method records the areas meant for improvement categorically but very diplomatically. This is more so, as this method documents the negative behaviours in the participants' achievement records for personal reference instead of open and direct criticism and thus, giving no room for harassment and embarrassment.

Limitations
Implementation of such 'Gamification' techniques requires meticulous planning and involvement from the Government in re-designing the English curriculum for engineering students. English professors need to equip themselves with relevant Technical and Business English through proper and regular exposure to the proceedings and processes that take place in business concerns or top companies. Appropriate co-operation is needed from corporate sectors, respective field experts, media, technical experts, etc. Appropriate and sufficient funding and assistance are also required for setting up fictional organizations inside the college campuses.

Conclusion
In spite of these limitations, the gamifying technique of creating a fictional organization incorporates most of the salient features of game mechanics mentioned in gamification.org such as Cascading Information Theory (breaking up information into bits so that each bit can be effectively learned), sense of achievement, community collaboration (working together to accomplish a task), gaining points/grades (gaining numerical values for every action), loss aversion (not getting a reward, but avoiding punishments), behavioural momentum (the tendency of people who are doing something to keep doing it) which involves the Fun Once, Fun Always – activities that remain enjoyable even with repetitions, countdown tactics that revolves round the key message that everyone can succeed sometime, level-jumps and sense of visual progression that leads to gradual success via completing a series of tasks, a sense of ownership that leads to a feeling that one controls something, blissful productivity that centers round the idea that it is not work for its own sake but the sense of productivity that makes one powerful, a sense of discovery/exploration ushering in chains of surprises, epic meaning of having accomplished something big as that of saving the world, and visualization of one's own progress while facing challenges, overcoming obstacles (alone or with a team), etc. In other words, apart from learning Technical and Business English, the students acquire various soft skills, both consciously and subconsciously. Here, language acquisition is more prominent rather than language learning. The

tasks given to students such as writing project proposals, business letters, conducting board meetings, etc. are embalmed with 'comprehensible inputs' (Krashen, 7) as the guidance is provided to them by language experts and field experts as and when required in the form of suggestions or tips rather than formal instructions which one normally finds in a traditional classroom. Further, the tasks given are slightly higher (providing i + 1 input as propounded by Krashen) than their entry level (Secondary School Communicative English), and this aptly matches with Stephen Krashen's input hypothesis – "We acquire … only when we understand language that contains structure that is "a little beyond" where we are now." (21) In addition, the game mechanics applied to the tasks given in the form of points/rewards, joy of winning, etc. create an immersive environment as recommended by Krashen. The task–based activities given to engineering students here usher in fun and pleasure of winning and accomplishing tasks at the end of the activities. This fun and frolic of game mechanics employed here act as low affective filters as they create 'a low anxiety situation' (Krashen, 32) by ushering in challenges that are attainable and appreciable. This ensures an informal environment, and improvement comes without error correction and more rapidly. In such situations, moreover, students are put 'off the defensive' (Krashen, 76) and acquire English language skills subconsciously most of the time without any strained efforts. They pick up the language and have a feel for correctness. So, let us gamify our classrooms!

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