

The Impact of Gamified Learning Activities on High School Students' Participation in English Speaking Lessons

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the impact of gamified learning activities on Grade 12 students' participation and speaking confidence in English speaking lessons. Using an action research design, the study was conducted over 12 weeks with 40 students from Class 12A1 at a high school in Hai Phong city. The intervention was implemented in two cycles: the first cycle used competitive gamified activities to stimulate initial engagement, while the second cycle applied collaborative tasks to promote peer support and reduce speaking anxiety. Data were collected through pre- and post-questionnaires, classroom observations, participation rubrics, and semi-structured interviews. The findings showed that gamified learning activities significantly improved students' engagement and speaking confidence. Quantitative results revealed statistically significant increases in both participation and confidence scores after the intervention. Qualitative data further indicated that competitive games created an energetic learning atmosphere, whereas collaborative activities provided psychological safety and peer scaffolding, helping students become more willing to speak English. Overall, the study suggests that gamification can be an effective pedagogical strategy for enhancing participation, confidence, and positive attitudes in high school English speaking classrooms.

Keywords: Gamified learning; student participation; speaking confidence; English speaking lessons; high school students.

INTRODUCTION

English speaking competence has become an essential goal of foreign language education, as learners are increasingly expected to use English for real-life communication rather than only for grammatical accuracy. In Vietnam, this orientation is clearly reflected in the 2018 General Education Curriculum, which emphasizes learner-centered teaching and the development of students' communicative competence (Ministry of Education and Training, 2018). However, despite this policy direction, English speaking lessons in many Vietnamese high schools remain strongly influenced by exam-oriented instruction. Since Grade 12 students are under pressure to prepare for the national high school graduation examination, classroom practices often prioritize grammar, vocabulary, and test-taking skills over oral communication. As a result, students may have limited opportunities to speak English actively in class.

Speaking is widely considered one of the most challenging skills for EFL learners because it requires not only linguistic knowledge but also psychological readiness (Leong & Ahmadi, 2017). Many students are reluctant to speak because they fear making mistakes, being negatively evaluated by peers, or losing face in front of the class (Horwitz et al., 1986; Tsiplakides, 2009). In Vietnamese high school contexts, this problem is often intensified by traditional teacher-centered instruction, where students tend to follow the teacher passively instead of taking an active role in communication (Nguyen & Trinh, 2025). Therefore, improving students' participation and confidence in English speaking lessons is an urgent pedagogical concern.

Gamification has been proposed as a potential solution to this problem. Gamification refers to the use of game design elements in non-game contexts, such as points, badges, leaderboards, challenges, role-play, and teamwork (Deterding et al., 2011). In education, these elements can make learning more enjoyable, motivating, and interactive (Kapp, 2012; Zainuddin et al., 2020). Previous research has shown that gamified learning can

increase student engagement, encourage active participation, and reduce anxiety by creating a more supportive classroom atmosphere (Hamari et al., 2014; Dehghanzadeh et al., 2019). In language learning, game-based activities may be especially useful in speaking lessons because they provide learners with a less threatening environment to practice oral communication.

Although previous studies have reported positive effects of gamification on motivation, engagement, and language learning outcomes, several research gaps remain. Many studies have focused on university students or general language learning skills, while fewer have examined gamified speaking activities among high school students, particularly Grade 12 learners in Vietnam (Ho et al., 2020; Ngoc, 2024). Moreover, much existing research uses experimental or quasi-experimental designs, which may not fully show how teachers adapt gamified activities during classroom implementation. Therefore, more action research is needed to explore how gamification can be planned, applied, observed, and refined in real high school speaking classrooms.

To address this gap, the present study investigates the impact of gamified learning activities on Grade 12 students' participation and speaking confidence in English speaking lessons. The study was conducted with 40 students from Class 12A1 at a high school in Hai Phong city, over a 12-week period. Using an action research design, the intervention was organized into two cycles. The first cycle used competitive gamified activities to stimulate initial engagement, while the second cycle applied collaborative activities to promote peer support and reduce speaking anxiety. The study aims to examine both the measurable changes in students' participation and confidence and their attitudes toward the use of gamified activities in speaking lessons.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does the use of gamified activities affect Grade 12 students' verbal participation and speaking confidence in English speaking lessons?
2. What are students' attitudes toward gamified activities in English speaking lessons?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Key Concepts

Gamification refers to the use of game design elements in non-game contexts, such as education (Deterding et al., 2011). In language teaching, gamification involves adding elements such as points, badges, leaderboards, timers, challenges, teamwork, and role-play into normal classroom activities to make learning more enjoyable, motivating, and interactive (Dicheva et al., 2015; Kapp, 2012). Unlike complete educational games, gamification does not require teachers to design a full game. Instead, it uses selected game elements to support learning objectives and increase student engagement.

In English speaking lessons, gamification can be particularly useful because speaking requires both linguistic ability and psychological readiness. Many EFL students are reluctant to speak because they fear making mistakes, being laughed at, or being negatively evaluated by classmates (Horwitz et al., 1986; Tsiplakides, 2009). Therefore, gamified activities may help create a more relaxed and supportive classroom environment where students feel safer to speak.

Student participation in this study is understood as a multidimensional construct. According to Fredricks et al. (2004), engagement includes behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. Behavioral engagement refers to students' visible participation, such as answering questions, joining group work, and speaking during tasks. Emotional engagement refers to students' feelings of interest, enjoyment, or anxiety. Cognitive engagement refers to students' mental effort and willingness to understand and complete learning tasks. In gamified speaking lessons, social engagement is also important because students often work in teams and support one another during communicative tasks (Nguyen & Trinh, 2025).

Speaking confidence is another central concept in this study. Confidence influences students' willingness to communicate in English. When learners feel anxious or afraid of mistakes, they often avoid speaking; however, when they feel supported, they are more likely to participate actively (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Yashima et al., 2004). Thus, improving speaking confidence is closely connected with increasing classroom participation.

Theoretical Framework

This study is mainly guided by Self-Determination Theory. Ryan and Deci (2000) argue that learner motivation is strengthened when three basic psychological needs are satisfied: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Competence refers to learners' feeling that they are capable of completing tasks successfully. Autonomy refers to their sense of choice and control in learning. Relatedness refers to their feeling of connection and support from others.

Gamification can support these three needs. Points, badges, and feedback can help students feel competent because they show progress and achievement. Role-play and challenges can create a sense of autonomy because students are given opportunities to act, decide, and respond in meaningful situations. Team-based activities can promote relatedness because students work together, help one another, and share responsibility for success (Sailer et al., 2017).

The study also draws on social constructivist learning theory. From Vygotsky's (1978) perspective, learning occurs through social interaction, and students can perform better when they receive support from more capable peers. In gamified speaking lessons, peer scaffolding is important because stronger students can help weaker students prepare sentences, correct mistakes, and feel safer before speaking in front of the class. This theoretical perspective supports the use of collaborative gamified activities in Cycle 2 of the intervention.

Previous Studies

Previous research has shown that gamification can improve learner motivation, engagement, and classroom participation. Hamari et al. (2014), in a review of empirical studies, found that gamification generally produces positive effects, especially in increasing user activity and engagement. Similarly, Dehghanzadeh et al. (2019) reported that gamified English learning environments are often perceived as enjoyable, motivating, and interactive. Zainuddin et al. (2020) also confirmed that motivation and engagement are among the most common positive outcomes of gamified learning.

In language learning, gamification has been found to support both participation and confidence. Ho et al. (2020) showed that game-based activities improved EFL students' speaking performance and increased their willingness to speak. Lv (2024) also found that the use of Kahoot! increased students' motivation, engagement, and learning performance. These findings suggest that gamified activities can help students become more active and confident in language classrooms.

Vietnamese studies have also reported positive effects of gamification in EFL learning. Phuong (2020) found that Vietnamese students had positive attitudes toward gamified learning tools such as Kahoot!, Quizizz, and Quizlet. Ngoc (2024) reported that Quizizz helped students improve vocabulary and grammar review while reducing stress. Nguyen and Trinh (2025) found that educational games increased peer interaction, student-teacher communication, and classroom engagement. These studies suggest that gamification is suitable for Vietnamese EFL contexts, although its effectiveness depends on careful classroom management and activity design.

Research Gap

Although previous studies confirm the benefits of gamification, several gaps remain. First, many studies have focused on university students, while fewer have investigated high school students, especially Grade 12 learners who face strong examination pressure. Second, existing studies often examine general motivation or academic achievement, while fewer studies focus specifically on verbal participation and speaking confidence

in English speaking lessons. Third, many previous studies use experimental or quasi-experimental designs, which may not fully explain how teachers adapt gamified activities during real classroom practice.

Therefore, the present study addresses these gaps by using an action research design to investigate how gamified learning activities affect Grade 12 students' participation, speaking confidence, and attitudes in English speaking lessons. The intervention moves from competitive activities to collaborative activities, allowing the researcher to examine not only whether gamification works, but also how different types of gamified activities influence students' speaking behavior and confidence.

METHODOLOGY

This study used an action research design to examine the effects of gamified learning activities on Grade 12 students' participation and speaking confidence. Action research was suitable because it allowed the teacher-researcher to plan, implement, observe, and reflect on classroom intervention in repeated cycles (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). The participants were 40 students from Class 12A1 at a high school in Hai Phong city, selected through purposive sampling because they showed low participation and limited confidence in speaking lessons. The 12-week intervention followed two cycles: Cycle 1 used competitive gamified activities such as quizzes, points, and leaderboards, while Cycle 2 used collaborative tasks such as role-play, team challenges, and peer support. Data were collected through pre- and post-questionnaires, video-based classroom observations with a participation rubric, and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire items were adapted from previous studies on engagement, language anxiety, and gamification (Fredricks et al., 2004; Horwitz et al., 1986; Lv, 2024). Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Cronbach's Alpha, paired samples t-tests, and Cohen's d, while interview data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke (2006). Ethical issues were addressed by obtaining school permission, informing students and parents, ensuring voluntary participation, protecting confidentiality, and using the data only for research purposes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results from the pre- and post-questionnaires showed that the gamified learning activities had a positive impact on students' participation and speaking confidence. For student engagement, the mean score increased from 2.496 before the intervention to 3.036 after the 12-week intervention. The paired samples t-test result showed a statistically significant difference, $t(39) = -10.364$, $p < .001$, with a large effect size, Cohen's $d = 0.889$. This indicates that students became more active, attentive, and willing to participate in English speaking lessons after experiencing gamified activities.

The questionnaire results also showed improvement in students' speaking confidence. The mean score increased from 2.425 before the intervention to 3.069 after the intervention. The difference was statistically significant, $t(39) = -10.182$, $p < .001$, with a large effect size, Cohen's $d = 0.815$. This suggests that the gamified activities helped reduce students' speaking anxiety and increased their confidence when expressing ideas in English.

Observation data further supported the questionnaire results. At the baseline stage, students showed low levels of verbal participation, with only 5 instances of volunteering and 8 instances of English contribution during classroom activities. During Cycle 1, competitive games such as Kahoot! and relay activities increased students' volunteering sharply, reaching 42 instances by Week 5. However, English contribution in group interaction remained limited. In Cycle 2, collaborative activities such as role-play and debate led to stronger peer interaction, with English contribution increasing to 60 instances by Week 11.

The participation rubric also showed clear improvement in overall engagement quality. The class average increased from 1.50 at baseline to 3.88 by the end of Cycle 2. While Cycle 1 was effective in creating excitement and enthusiasm, Cycle 2 produced deeper interaction, better focus, and greater student initiative. Overall, the findings indicate that competitive gamification helped activate students' initial participation, while collaborative gamification was more effective in promoting sustained speaking practice and peer support.

The semi-structured interviews helped explain why students' participation and confidence improved after the gamified intervention. Three main themes were identified: the affective impact of competitive games, the role of peer support in reducing speaking anxiety, and practical challenges in classroom implementation.

First, competitive gamified activities in Cycle 1 created a more energetic classroom atmosphere and encouraged students to participate. Students reported that games such as *Hero Hunt* and *Kahoot!* made speaking lessons more exciting than traditional textbook-based lessons. One mid-participation student stated, *"I used to fall asleep in English speaking lessons because I didn't know what to say. But when the teacher used Hero Hunt and Kahoot, I woke up immediately."* This shows that competitive elements such as points, music, and rankings helped attract students' attention and stimulated their willingness to join classroom activities. However, competition did not benefit all students equally. One low-participation student explained that although the games were enjoyable, she sometimes avoided answering because she was afraid of making mistakes. This suggests that competitive games were effective in increasing initial engagement, but they could still create pressure for weaker or quieter students.

Second, collaborative gamified activities in Cycle 2 were more effective in building students' speaking confidence. Students felt safer when they worked in teams because their classmates helped them prepare ideas, practise sentences, and correct mistakes before speaking. One low-participation student shared, *"In the beginning, I was scared because I had to answer alone. But in the group part, I felt safe. My group leader helped me practise the sentence before I spoke to the class."* This excerpt shows that peer support reduced students' fear of public failure and helped them become more willing to speak English. In addition, stronger students also benefited from collaborative tasks. One high-participation student said that explaining grammar and vocabulary to teammates helped her understand the lesson more deeply. Therefore, collaborative gamification promoted both psychological safety and peer scaffolding.

Third, the interviews revealed several implementation challenges. Some students reported that competitive games made the class too noisy, which sometimes made it difficult to hear the teacher's instructions. Technical problems also affected the flow of digital games. For example, one student mentioned, *"There was one time my phone lost connection during the quiz. I was frustrated because I knew the answer but couldn't submit it."* Another challenge was students' use of Vietnamese during group work, especially when they wanted to finish tasks quickly. However, this problem was reduced when the teacher introduced clearer rules and bonus points for using English.

Overall, the interview findings supported the questionnaire and observation results. Competitive gamification was useful for creating excitement and activating initial participation, while collaborative gamification was more effective in reducing anxiety, strengthening peer support, and sustaining students' speaking confidence.

The findings indicate that gamified learning activities had a positive effect on Grade 12 students' participation and speaking confidence in English speaking lessons. The increase in student engagement from the pre-questionnaire to the post-questionnaire shows that gamification helped reduce classroom passivity and encouraged students to become more active in speaking tasks. This result is consistent with previous studies which found that gamified learning can increase motivation, attention, and classroom engagement (Hamari et al., 2014; Dehghanzadeh et al., 2019; Zainuddin et al., 2020). In this study, competitive activities such as *Kahoot!*, relay games, and point-based challenges were especially effective in creating excitement and encouraging students to volunteer answers. However, these activities mainly stimulated initial participation rather than deep interaction.

The improvement in speaking confidence also suggests that gamification helped lower students' affective barriers. Before the intervention, many students were afraid of making mistakes and being judged by classmates. After the intervention, students reported feeling more comfortable and confident when speaking English. This finding supports Horwitz et al. (1986) and Tsiplakides (2009), who argue that anxiety and fear of negative evaluation are major barriers in EFL speaking classrooms. The interview data further showed that collaborative activities in Cycle 2 gave students a stronger sense of psychological safety. When students worked in teams, received peer support, and practised before speaking, they became more willing to take risks in English.

Another important finding is that different types of gamification produced different effects. Competitive gamification was useful for “waking up” the class and increasing enthusiasm, but it sometimes created pressure for weaker students. By contrast, collaborative gamification was more effective in promoting sustained interaction and confidence. This can be explained through Self-Determination Theory, which states that motivation increases when learners’ needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness are satisfied (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In this study, points and rewards supported students’ sense of competence, while teamwork and peer scaffolding strengthened relatedness. This also aligns with Vygotsky’s (1978) view that learning is supported through social interaction and assistance from more capable peers.

The findings also have practical implications for Vietnamese high school English teaching. In exam-oriented contexts, speaking lessons are often less emphasized, and students may become passive. This study shows that short, well-planned gamified activities can be integrated into regular textbook lessons without disrupting the curriculum. However, the results also suggest that teachers should not rely only on competition. A balanced design is needed: competitive games can be used at the beginning to create energy, while collaborative tasks should be used later to build confidence, peer support, and deeper communication.

Despite its positive results, the intervention also revealed some challenges. Classroom noise, unstable internet connection, and students’ use of Vietnamese during group work sometimes affected lesson quality. Therefore, teachers need clear rules, backup low-tech activities, and classroom management strategies when using gamification. Overall, the study suggests that gamification is an effective pedagogical strategy for improving participation and speaking confidence, especially when it moves from simple competition to meaningful collaboration.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the impact of gamified learning activities on Grade 12 students’ participation and speaking confidence in English speaking lessons. The findings showed that gamification had a positive influence on students’ classroom engagement, willingness to speak, and confidence in using English. Competitive games in the first cycle helped create an energetic atmosphere and encouraged students to participate more actively at the beginning of the intervention. However, collaborative activities in the second cycle were more effective in reducing students’ fear of making mistakes and promoting peer support. Through teamwork, role-play, and group challenges, students felt safer and more motivated to express their ideas in English. Overall, the study suggests that gamification can be an effective pedagogical strategy for improving speaking lessons in Vietnamese high schools, especially when teachers balance competition with collaboration and design activities that support both motivation and psychological safety.

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