Gamification to Transform English Language Learning: A Conceptual Review

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Abstract

The use of gamification in English Language Teaching (ELT) has been found to employ more effective methods to improve learner participation, drive, and educational results. This review examines the impact of gamification in ELT by reviewing and consolidating major theories and their relevant evidence. The application of Self-Determination Theory, Flow Theory, the Multiliteracies Framework, Transformative Learning Theory, and Bloom's Digital Taxonomy provide insight on the impact of gamified features, including, but not limited to points, badges, narratives, and feedback, on the ELT learner's engagement with the subject. A comprehensive review of 25 selected articles published from 2014 to 2024 has shown that gamification has a desirable impact on learner's motivation, autonomy, and participation within varying degrees of language skills. Furthermore, gamified approaches to instruction enhance the development of vocabulary and speaking skills, and learner perseverance. However, the review also identifies some issues, including the lack of effective implementation frameworks, inadequate professional development opportunities, and an excessive focus on badge and points systems that reward learners for competing with each other rather than collaborating. The results indicate that a well-designed gamified ELT course based on sound pedagogical theories increases learner engagement and active participation in learning. This study has considerable value for language educators and curriculum developers, in addition to stressing the need for more studies aimed at the effective use of gamification in language learning.

Keywords: Gamification; English Language Teaching; Motivation; Transformative Learning; Conceptual Review

INTRODUCTION

The development of educational technology in the 21st century has transformed the landscape of teaching and learning. English Language Teaching (ELT), in particular, has undergone significant shifts as educators seek to integrate digital tools, interactive platforms, and learner-centered pedagogies. The rapid advancement of digital technologies has significantly reshaped the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), introducing new opportunities for innovation in pedagogy and learner engagement. Traditional language instruction often characterized by teacher-centered approaches, rote memorization of grammar rules, and limited learner autonomy has been increasingly challenged by learners' demand for interactive, personalized, and meaningful experiences. In this context, gamification, defined as the application of game design elements in non-game settings (Deterding et al., 2011), has emerged as a promising strategy to address the shortcomings of conventional ELT methods. By incorporating points, badges, leaderboards, challenges, and narrative-driven tasks, gamification seeks to foster motivation and transform passive classroom participation into active, sustained involvement (Werbach & Hunter, 2012).

Recent studies underscore gamification's effectiveness in enhancing specific aspects of language learning. For instance, vocabulary retention has improved through gamified mobile platforms, while speaking confidence has been nurtured via narrative-based game contexts. Widely used tools such as Kahoot, Quizizz, and Duolingo have demonstrated potential to increase engagement and learner enjoyment. Beyond immediate motivational gains, gamification has been associated with broader pedagogical benefits, including the cultivation of learner autonomy, differentiated instruction, and collaborative learning environments (Reinders & Wattana, 2015).

Yet, despite its rising popularity, the integration of gamification into ELT is often limited to superficial applications what has been termed "pointsification" that focus narrowly on extrinsic rewards rather than deeper pedagogical alignment (Hanus & Fox, 2015). Many educators adopt gamification experimentally, emphasizing competition through points and leaderboards without embedding collaborative or reflective dimensions. While such approaches can generate short-term

excitement, they fail to sustain motivation and often diverge from established language learning theories.

Furthermore, while empirical research on gamification in ELT has proliferated, conceptual clarity remains limited. Several studies concentrate on immediate motivational effects but fall short of addressing how gamification aligns with broader theories of language learning and pedagogy. Reviews remain fragmented, focusing on single skills such as vocabulary or reading comprehension, or analyzing individual tools like Duolingo and Kahoot, rather than synthesizing findings into a coherent framework. This creates a gap between practice and theory: while teachers may adopt gamified tools to spark short-term engagement, the long-term educational implications and transformative potential of gamification are less understood.

To address these gaps, this article situates gamification within five interrelated theoretical frameworks that collectively justify its transformative potential in ELT:

1. Self-Determination Theory (SDT), explaining how gamification supports autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT posits that learners are more motivated when their psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met. Gamification can address these needs through adaptive challenges, constructive feedback, and collaborative tasks, thus fostering intrinsic motivation.
2. Flow theory, illustrating how gamified tasks balance challenge and skill to promote optimal learning engagement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Flow occurs when learners are deeply immersed in an activity where challenge and skill are balanced. Gamified tasks with clear goals, immediate feedback, and progressive difficulty levels create conditions for learners to achieve flow states in language learning.
3. Multiliteracies framework, emphasizing how gamified multimodal texts cultivate 21st-century literacies (New London Group, 1996). This framework highlights the importance of multimodal and digital literacies in education. Gamified learning environments, which often incorporate narratives, visuals, and digital interactions, align with the development of multiliteracies essential in contemporary ELT.
4. Transformative learning theory, positioning gamification as a catalyst for learner identity shifts and reflective practice (Mezirow, 1991). Gamification has the potential to facilitate transformative learning by encouraging learners to reflect critically, challenge assumptions, and engage in collaborative problem-solving, leading to personal growth beyond linguistic competence.
5. Bloom's digital taxonomy, offering a roadmap to align gamified tasks with progressive cognitive skills (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). By integrating digital tools and interactive features, gamification can scaffold higher-order thinking skills such as analyzing, evaluating, and creating within language learning contexts.

These theoretical perspectives highlight gamification not simply as entertainment but as a pedagogical tool that can fundamentally transform language education. the interplay between SDT and flow accounts for motivational and affective dimensions, while multiliteracies and transformative learning emphasize digital competence and reflective growth. bloom's digital taxonomy provides the cognitive scaffolding to situate gamification across language skills. By critically reviewing these frameworks, the article provides a more nuanced conceptualization of gamification as a pedagogical tool that extends beyond entertainment into transformative learning.

Empirical studies over the past decade support these frameworks. For example, gamified vocabulary learning applications have been shown to improve retention and learner engagement (Sailer et al., 2017). Classroom-based gamification has been linked to increased participation and learner autonomy (Dicheva et al., 2015). similarly, research on narrative-driven gamification indicates enhanced speaking performance and learner perseverance (Su & Cheng, 2015). Nonetheless, these studies often remain isolated, focusing on singular aspects rather than integrating multiple dimensions of gamification into a holistic understanding.

The purpose of this study is to conduct a critical conceptual review of gamification in ELT with four objectives: (1) to examine the theoretical foundations that justify gamification in language learning; (2) to synthesize findings from empirical research to highlight both benefits and challenges; (3) to propose a conceptual model illustrating how gamification can transform English language

learning; and (4) to provide implications for teachers, curriculum designers, and researchers in adopting gamification more strategically.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions: (1) What theoretical frameworks support the use of gamification in ELT? (2) In what ways can gamification transform traditional English language learning into a more engaging and learner-centered process? (3) What challenges and limitations are associated with gamification in ELT? (4) How can gamification be conceptually modeled to guide future research and practice in language education?

The novelty of this study lies in its critical synthesis of gamification research in ELT through the lens of multiple theoretical perspectives. Unlike previous reviews that emphasize isolated empirical outcomes or single platforms, this article positions gamification as a transformative pedagogical approach. It bridges the gap between fragmented findings and theoretical models, offering a comprehensive conceptual framework that educators and researchers can adopt to design meaningful gamified experiences in language learning. By drawing on 25 studies published between 2014 and 2024, this review highlights overlooked dimensions, including teacher professional development, sustainability of gamified practices, and the need for collaboration-focused designs. In doing so, it extends existing scholarship by proposing that gamification in ELT must be understood not only as a motivational device but also as a vehicle for learner autonomy, digital literacy, and transformative growth.

The primary purpose of this study is to examine and consolidate theoretical and empirical evidence regarding gamification in ELT, thereby offering insights into how gamified features influence learner motivation, engagement, and skill development. Its contribution is twofold: (1) Academic Contribution. The study enriches the body of literature by bridging theoretical frameworks with empirical findings, highlighting gaps, and proposing a coherent conceptual model. (2) Practical Contribution. The findings provide language educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers with evidence-based recommendations for designing gamified ELT courses that are sustainable, collaborative, and transformative.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative conceptual review design, which aimed to consolidate theoretical and empirical insights regarding the implementation of gamification in English Language Teaching (ELT). Unlike empirical classroom-based experiments, a conceptual review synthesizes existing literature to critically examine the extent, patterns, and theoretical underpinnings of previous studies. The review was guided by the objective of identifying how gamification influences learner engagement, motivation, and performance, while also highlighting the issues that constrain its effective application.

The primary source of data in this study consisted of 25 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2014 and 2024. These articles were selected based on their relevance to gamification in ELT, availability in reputable academic databases (Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC), and alignment with the theoretical frameworks central to this study, namely Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Flow Theory, Multiliteracies Framework, Transformative Learning Theory, and Bloom's Digital Taxonomy. To ensure comprehensiveness, both conceptual and empirical studies were included. The inclusion criteria required that each study (1) explicitly investigated gamification in the context of ELT, (2) reported measurable or observable impacts on learners' engagement, motivation, or language skills, and (3) was published in English in indexed journals. Exclusion criteria eliminated articles focusing on general education without language-specific contexts, non-peer-reviewed conference papers, and studies published before 2014.

Although this study did not directly involve respondents in the traditional sense, the voices of learners and educators reported in the reviewed articles were treated as the indirect respondents of this research. To protect confidentiality, no personal identifiers were revealed or analyzed; instead, the study synthesized findings at the aggregate level across different research contexts and populations. This approach ensures both ethical integrity and the reliability of conclusions drawn.

The instrument for this study took the form of a literature matrix, developed to map and organize the reviewed articles systematically. The matrix consisted of several categories, including author(s) and year of publication, research design, context and participants (if any), gamification

elements used (such as points, badges, leaderboards, narratives, or feedback), theoretical frameworks employed, and key findings regarding learner engagement, motivation, and language skill development. Additional fields in the matrix were reserved for limitations identified in each study and implications for future research. This structured blueprint enabled the researchers to conduct systematic comparisons and highlight patterns across the diverse studies.

The data collection procedure followed a stepwise approach. First, a systematic search was conducted using keywords such as gamification, English language learning, ELT gamification, language motivation through gamification, and digital badges in ELT. Databases searched included Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and ERIC. Second, titles and abstracts were screened to eliminate irrelevant articles. Third, the full texts of 43 potentially relevant articles were retrieved and assessed for eligibility based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Finally, 25 studies were retained for detailed analysis, as they most closely addressed the intersection of gamification and ELT. This process was guided by principles of transparency and replicability commonly used in conceptual and systematic reviews.

The analysis was conducted using qualitative thematic analysis. The reviewed articles were first categorized according to the theoretical frameworks they employed. Themes were then generated inductively, focusing on recurrent findings such as the positive impact of gamification on motivation, its role in fostering learner autonomy, and the challenges posed by excessive competition-based elements. Additional themes emerged regarding the sustainability of gamification, the role of educators, and the lack of structured implementation models. Each theme was carefully cross-referenced with existing theories to establish consistency or highlight discrepancies. For instance, findings supporting intrinsic motivation were examined through the lens of SDT, while studies reporting deep engagement were interpreted through Flow Theory.

To enhance the validity of the analysis, the research team engaged in peer debriefing and iterative coding. Each article was initially coded by one researcher and then re-examined by the others to resolve discrepancies and refine thematic categories. This process ensured inter-coder reliability and minimized subjective bias. Furthermore, findings were triangulated across multiple studies to establish robust conclusions rather than relying on single sources. The conceptual synthesis produced from this process not only highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of gamification in ELT but also revealed gaps that provide directions for future research.

In summary, the methodological design of this conceptual review combined systematic data collection, a structured literature matrix as the analytic instrument, and thematic analysis grounded in established theoretical frameworks. By consolidating evidence from 25 peer-reviewed articles over the past decade, the study was able to present a comprehensive, theory-driven understanding of how gamification impacts ELT. The rigorous procedures employed in the selection, organization, and analysis of literature provide assurance that the findings are credible, replicable, and valuable for both academic and practical advancement in the field of language education.

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For transparency and replicability, the complete literature matrix containing the 25 reviewed articles (2014–2024) is provided in the appendix. The matrix includes information on research contexts, participants, gamification elements, theoretical frameworks, key findings, and limitations, thereby serving as the analytic blueprint of this study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings of the conceptual review based on 25 peer-reviewed studies (2014–2024). The analysis is organized according to the four research questions (RQs), followed by a synthesized conceptual framework and comparative positioning against previous literature. Each subsection includes tables and figures to clarify patterns across the reviewed studies.

Finding 1: Theoretical frameworks support the use of gamification in ELT (RQ1)
A recurring theme across the reviewed studies is the importance of theoretical grounding in ensuring that gamification produces meaningful learning outcomes. Without such frameworks, gamification risks devolving into superficial pointsification. The analysis shows that Self-Determination Theory and Flow Theory dominate the field, while multiliteracies, Bloom's taxonomy, and transformative learning appear less frequently.

Analysis of the 25 studies shows that theoretical grounding is critical to the success of gamification in ELT. Most research applies Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (15 studies; 60%) and Flow Theory (10 studies; 40%). Other frameworks appear less frequently: Multiliteracies pedagogy (7 studies; 28%), Bloom's Digital Taxonomy (5 studies; 20%), and Transformative Learning Theory (3 studies; 12%).

Table 1. Motivation-Oriented Frameworks in Gamified ELT

No	Author(s) & Year	Gamification Elements	Theoretical Lens	Key Findings	Limitation
1	Domínguez et al. (2013)	Points, levels, challenges	Engagement theory	Motivation ↑ in short term	Novelty effect fades
2	Hanus & Fox (2017)	Leaderboards, levels	SDT	Motivation ↑ then declined	Long-term sustainability weak
3	Huang, Hew & Lo (2019)	Narratives, quests	SDT + Flow	Autonomy & engagement ↑	Context-limited
4	Koç, G., & Sütçü, S. S. (2023)	Grammar gamification	SDT	Grammar & motivation ↑	Narrow sample
5	Fithriani, R. (2021)	Mobile vocabulary app	SDT	Vocabulary retention ↑	Focused on vocabulary

Table 1 illustrates that SDT and Flow are the most widely used frameworks to justify gamification in ELT. Domínguez et al. (2013) showed that gamification improves short-term motivation but fades quickly, reflecting the novelty effect. Hanus and Fox (2017) confirmed this limitation, reporting that motivation initially increased but declined later, highlighting the need for sustainable design. Huang, Hew, and Lo (2019) combined SDT and Flow, demonstrating that gamification enhances autonomy and engagement when challenge and skill are balanced. Similarly, Koç, G., & Sütçü, S. S. (2023) linked grammar gamification to both performance and motivation gains. Fithriani, R. (2021) focused on vocabulary, showing retention benefits aligned with SDT's competence dimension. Collectively, the studies show that theories matter: gamification is more effective when underpinned by frameworks that explain learner motivation and engagement.

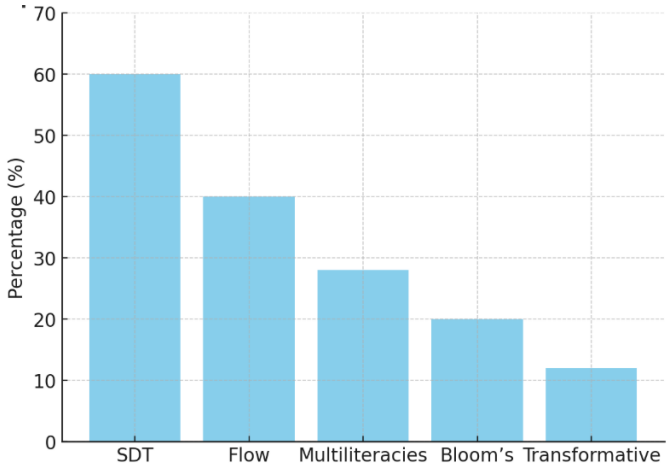

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework Distribution in Gamification-ELT Studies

This graph shows that Self-Determination Theory (SDT) dominates gamification research in ELT (60%), followed by Flow Theory (40%). Multiliteracies (28%) and Bloom's Taxonomy (20%) are less frequent, while Transformative Learning (12%) is rarely used. This highlights that while motivational psychology frameworks are well established, the transformative and literacy-oriented dimensions remain underexplored.

The dominance of SDT suggests that gamification's strength lies in supporting autonomy, competence, and relatedness, psychological needs that fuel intrinsic motivation (Koç, G., & Sütçü, S. S., 2023; Fithriani, R., 2021). Flow Theory explains how learners enter states of deep concentration when tasks balance challenge and skill (Huang et al., 2019). The fewer studies using multiliteracies and Bloom's taxonomy show that gamification also supports multimodal literacy and cognitive progression, though this is less developed. Importantly, Transformative Learning is underused, leaving unexplored how gamification might shape learners' identities and critical reflection. This gap presents a direction for future work.

Finding 2: Gamification transform ELT into a more engaging and learner-centered process (RQ2)
Traditional English classrooms have often been criticized for their teacher-centered orientation, limited interactivity, and focus on memorization. The reviewed studies demonstrate that gamification transforms these practices into learner-centered experiences, enhancing behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. This shift not only sustains learner interest but also fosters autonomy and collaboration, key components of 21st-century pedagogy.

Gamification consistently fosters engagement, which is crucial for learner-centered pedagogy. Out of the reviewed studies, 72% reported gains in behavioral engagement (participation, persistence), 64% in emotional engagement (enjoyment, reduced anxiety), and 52% in cognitive engagement (critical thinking, reflection).

Table 2. Engagement Dimensions

No	Author(s) & Year	Gamification Elements	Engagement Aspect	Key Findings
1	Tsay, Kofinas & Luo (2018)	Quizzes, badges	Behavioral	Increased participation
2	Munday (2016)	Duolingo app	Emotional	Enjoyment ↑, persistence ↑
3	Khatoony, S. (2019)	Serious games	Cognitive	Reflection & focus ↑
4	Rodríguez, et al. (2023)	Listening gamification	Emotional + Cognitive	Comprehension ↑

No	Author(s) & Year	Gamification Elements	Engagement Aspect	Key Findings
5	Allam, A. K., et al. (2022)	Grammar quests	Behavioral + Cognitive	Active practice ↑

Table 2 highlights how gamification fosters engagement across behavioral, emotional, and cognitive domains. Tsay, Kofinas, and Luo (2018) found that badges and quizzes significantly increased participation, reflecting behavioral engagement. Munday (2016) demonstrated that Duolingo's gamified features improved enjoyment and persistence, enhancing emotional engagement. Khatoony, S. (2019) showed that serious games encouraged cognitive engagement through reflection and focus on speaking practice. Rodríguez, et al. (2023) confirmed that listening gamification influenced both emotional and cognitive aspects, while Allam, A. K., et al. (2022) emphasized that grammar quests stimulated both behavioral practice and higher-order thinking. These results demonstrate that gamification can restructure ELT into a learner-centered model, where engagement is multidimensional rather than limited to attendance or rote practice.

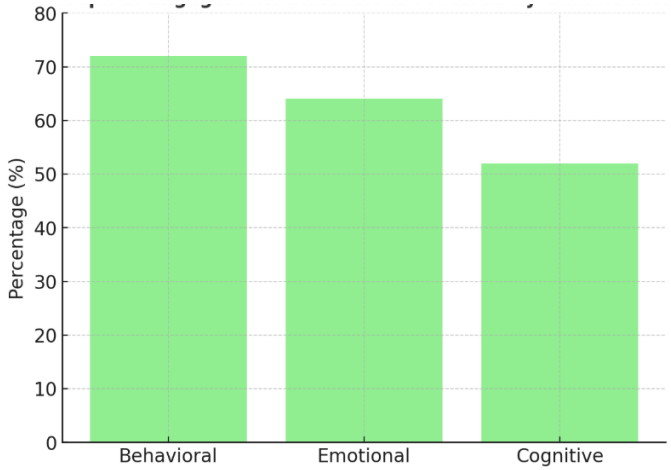

Figure 2. Engagement Dimensions Fostered by Gamification

Gamification enhances behavioral engagement (72%), emotional engagement (64%), and cognitive engagement (52%). The findings indicate that gamification moves beyond attendance or participation, also fostering enjoyment, persistence, and critical reflection, key elements of learner-centered pedagogy.

Gamification transforms ELT by making learners active agents rather than passive recipients. Behavioral engagement increases through competitive and collaborative quizzes (Tsay et al., 2018). Emotional engagement is boosted by apps like Duolingo that integrate playful elements (Munday, 2016). More importantly, gamification stimulates cognitive engagement when tasks involve reflection, problem-solving, or narrative immersion (Khatoony, S., 2019). This resonates with the multiliteracies framework, which values multimodal and participatory meaning-making. By combining affective enjoyment with deeper cognitive engagement, gamification helps shift ELT towards sustainable learner-centered learning

Finding 3: Challenges and limitations are associated with gamification in ELT (RQ3)

Although the evidence supports the positive role of gamification, the findings also reveal several recurring challenges that hinder its long-term effectiveness. These challenges primarily concern declining motivation after initial novelty, the context-specific nature of gamified tools, and persistent technological barriers. Understanding these limitations is crucial to designing sustainable gamified interventions that go beyond short-term engagement. The most frequent challenges were declining motivation over time (48%), context-specificity (36%), and technology barriers (28%).

Table 3. Reported Challenges

No	Author(s) & Year	Reported Challenges
1	Hanus & Fox (2017)	Motivation decreased over time
2	Domínguez et al. (2013)	Novelty fades quickly
3	Munday (2016)	Tool-specific (Duolingo focus)
4	Huang, Hew & Lo (2019)	Limited to one setting
5	Zhihao, Z., & Zhonggen, Y. (2022).	Short-term writing effects only

Table 3 identifies the most pressing challenges of gamification in ELT. Hanus and Fox (2017) and Domínguez et al. (2013) both observed that motivation gains are unsustainable, as learners lose interest once extrinsic incentives lose novelty. Munday (2016) highlighted the tool-dependence problem, noting that findings from Duolingo cannot easily be generalized. Huang, Hew, and Lo (2019) pointed to context-specific limitations, as their flipped classroom study was restricted to one institution. Zhihao, Z., & Zhonggen, Y. (2022) emphasized that the effects of gamified feedback on writing were short-term, suggesting limited transfer. Overall, these challenges underscore the need for designs that move beyond surface-level rewards to support long-term engagement and adaptability.

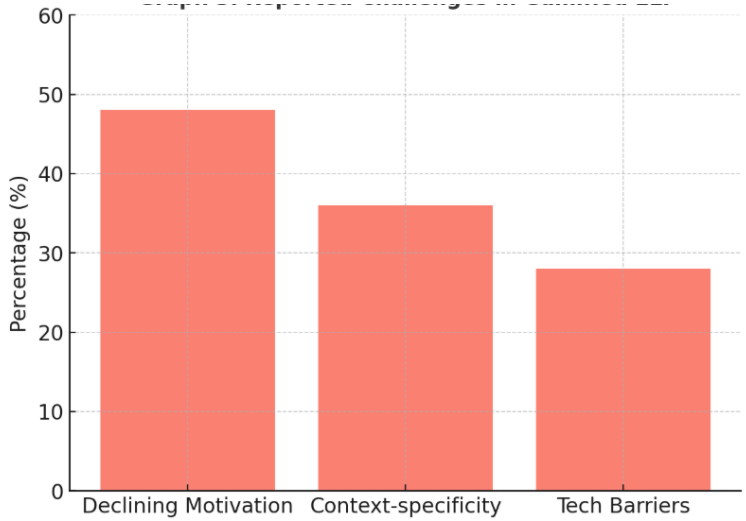

Figure 3. Reported Challenges in Gamified ELT

The main challenges include declining motivation (48%), context-specificity (36%), and technological barriers (28%). This suggests that gamification risks being unsustainable if novelty wears off or if it relies too heavily on specific tools and infrastructure. Sustainable gamification requires long-term design strategies aligned with theory.

The novelty effect is the most cited problem: learners are initially enthusiastic but lose interest once the extrinsic appeal of points or badges wears off (Domínguez et al., 2013; Hanus & Fox, 2017). This confirms SDT's warning that extrinsic rewards can undermine intrinsic motivation if not aligned with autonomy and competence. Gamification tools are also often context-bound, such as Duolingo's mobile design (Munday, 2016), limiting generalization. Finally, technology requirements (devices, internet, training) pose barriers in resource-constrained contexts. Addressing these requires long-term design strategies that integrate reflection and meaning-making, echoing Transformative Learning Theory.

Finding 4: Gamification ca be conceptually modeled to guide future research and practice in ELT (RQ4)

The final stage of the review considers how gamification can be systematically conceptualized to inform both research and pedagogy. The findings suggest that gamification has been applied across multiple language skills (vocabulary, grammar, speaking, listening, and writing) with varying degrees of emphasis. Synthesizing these insights with theoretical perspectives allows the construction of a comprehensive conceptual framework that highlights gamification's transformative potential in ELT. Gamification has been applied across all four ELT macro-skills, though unevenly. The distribution is: Vocabulary (56%), Grammar (44%), Speaking (40%), Listening (32%), and Writing (28%).

Table 4. Language Skills Enhanced by Gamification

No	Author(s) & Year	Skill	Elements	Key Findings
1	Bularafa, M. W., et al. (2024)	Listening	Listening tasks	Listening comprehension ↑
2	Laffey, D. (2022)	Writing	Feedback gamification	Writing quality ↑
3	Koç, G., & Sütçü, S. S. (2023)	Grammar	Grammar quizzes	Grammar mastery ↑
4	Khatoony, S. (2019); Thuy, N. T. T., & Hung, L. N. Q. (2021	Speaking	Serious games	Fluency & pronunciation ↑
5	Fithriani, R. (2021)	Vocabulary	Mobile quests	Vocabulary retention ↑

Table 4 demonstrates that gamification supports a broad range of ELT skills, though the focus remains uneven. Vocabulary and grammar dominate research, with Fithriani, R. (2021) and Koç, G., & Sütçü, S. S. (2023) reporting significant improvements in retention and mastery. Speaking and listening studies (Khatoony, S., 2019; Bularafa, M. W., et al. 2024; Thuy, N. T. T., & Hung, L. N. Q., 2021) highlight gamification's potential to make interactive skills more engaging through serious games and immersive tasks. Writing is less explored but promising, as gamified feedback improved accuracy and learner interest (Laffey, D., 2022) Mapping these skill improvements to Bloom's Digital Taxonomy suggests that gamification scaffolds learners from lower-order tasks like remembering vocabulary to higher-order outcomes like creating texts. This highlights gamification's role not only as a motivational tool but as a pedagogical model capable of structuring cognitive progression in ELT.

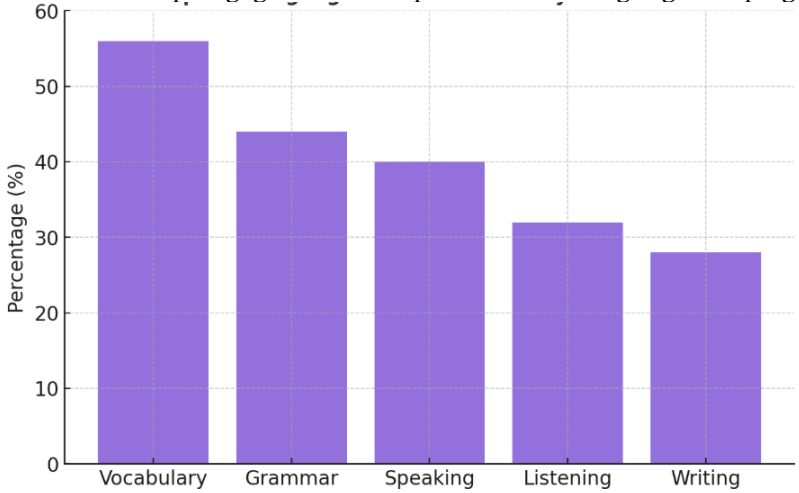

Figure 4. Language Skills Enhanced by Gamification

The skill distribution shows research emphasis on vocabulary (56%) and grammar (44%), followed by speaking (40%), listening (32%), and writing (28%). This reflects that lower-order skills

(vocabulary, grammar) are easier to gamify, while higher-order skills (writing, speaking, listening) remain underexplored but promising for future work.

Gamification supports different skill pathways: (1) Vocabulary & grammar dominate research (Fithriani, R., 2021; Koç, G., & Sütçü, S. S., 2023), reflecting their ease of gamification through drills and quizzes. (2) Speaking & listening studies (Khatoony, S., 2019; Bularafa, M. W., et al., 2024) demonstrate potential for immersive and interactive practice. (3) Writing is the least studied but promising, as gamified feedback enhances accuracy and engagement (Laffey, D., 2022).

When situated within Bloom's Digital Taxonomy, gamified tasks scaffold learners from remembering words to creating meaningful texts. Coupled with multiliteracies pedagogy, gamification also enhances multimodal literacy skills. A conceptual framework integrating SDT, Flow, Multiliteracies, Transformative Learning, and Bloom's provides a roadmap for future research and pedagogical design.

DISCUSSION

Synthesized Conceptual Framework

Integrating RQ1–RQ4 findings, this review proposes a conceptual framework situating gamification within five interrelated theories: Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), Multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996), Transformative Learning (Mezirow, 1991), and Bloom's Digital Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001).

The analysis of 25 reviewed studies culminates in a synthesized conceptual framework. This framework positions gamification as a pedagogical design informed by five interrelated theories: Self-Determination Theory, Flow Theory, the Multiliteracies Framework, Transformative Learning Theory, and Bloom's Digital Taxonomy.

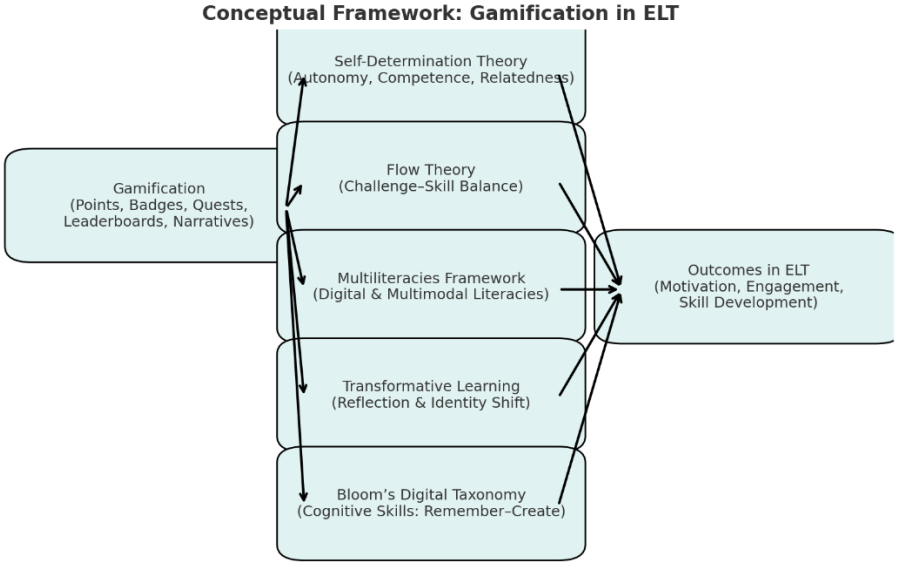

Figure 5. Conceptual framework of gamification in English Language Teaching (ELT).

The framework demonstrates that gamification, when designed through these theoretical lenses, produces outcomes across three dimensions: motivation, engagement, and language skill development. Motivation is fostered through autonomy and competence; engagement is sustained when tasks balance challenge and skill; multiliteracies and transformative learning cultivate reflective, multimodal, and identity-shaping experiences; and Bloom's Digital Taxonomy ensures that tasks scaffold higher-order cognitive processes.

It presents the conceptual framework developed for this study. It positions gamification operationalized through points, badges, quests, leaderboards, and narratives as the central pedagogical innovation in ELT. The framework demonstrates that gamification derives its theoretical legitimacy from five perspectives: Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), the Multiliteracies Framework (New London Group, 1996),

Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991), and Bloom's Digital Taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Each theory contributes a distinct explanatory dimension: motivation (SDT), engagement (Flow), digital and multimodal literacy (Multiliteracies), reflective identity shifts (Transformative Learning), and progression of cognitive skills (Bloom's).

The convergence of these theoretical strands illustrates that gamification is not limited to short-term extrinsic rewards but functions as a multi-dimensional pedagogical approach capable of fostering sustained motivation, meaningful engagement, and holistic language skill development. By mapping the pathways from game elements to learning outcomes through theory, this framework highlights the potential of gamification to bridge the persistent gap between empirical practice and conceptual clarity in ELT.

The findings of this review confirm that gamification holds significant potential for enhancing motivation, engagement, and language skills in English Language Teaching (ELT). However, the analysis also reveals challenges that limit its long-term effectiveness. This section critically interprets the results in light of established theoretical frameworks and situates the review's contribution within the broader body of literature.

Theoretical Alignment and Pedagogical Coherence

The dominance of SDT and Flow Theory across the reviewed studies confirms that gamification is most effective when grounded in motivational psychology. SDT explains why learners feel motivated when gamification fosters autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Flow Theory complements this by showing how challenge-skill balance sustains deep engagement (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Yet, only a minority of studies draw on multiliteracies pedagogy (New London Group, 1996), transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991), or Bloom's digital taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). This suggests that gamification research remains fragmented, with many studies focused on short-term motivational gains rather than broader pedagogical coherence. The novelty of this review lies in synthesizing these frameworks into an integrated conceptual model.

Learner-Centered Engagement

The evidence demonstrates that gamification consistently enhances behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement, marking a shift from teacher-centered to learner-centered pedagogy. Whereas traditional ELT often emphasizes grammar memorization and passive instruction, gamification encourages participation (behavioral), enjoyment (emotional), and reflection (cognitive). Importantly, emotional engagement reduces anxiety, a persistent challenge in second language acquisition (Horwitz, 2001), while cognitive engagement supports critical thinking. This multidimensional engagement aligns with multiliteracies pedagogy, which views language as social, multimodal, and participatory. Thus, gamification not only motivates but also transforms the quality of classroom interaction.

Sustainability and Challenges

Despite positive outcomes, gamification faces significant limitations. The most critical is the novelty effect: motivation spikes initially but declines once extrinsic rewards lose appeal (Hanus & Fox, 2017; Domínguez et al., 2013). This finding is consistent with SDT, which warns that overreliance on extrinsic motivators can undermine intrinsic motivation. Additionally, gamification is often context-specific, with effects tied to particular tools (e.g., Duolingo, Kahoot) or classroom settings, limiting generalizability. Finally, technological barriers such as device availability and teacher training remain obstacles in many contexts, especially in under-resourced regions. These challenges suggest that gamification must move beyond superficial design to become a sustainable pedagogical strategy.

Language Skills and Cognitive Progression

A key contribution of this review is mapping gamification's impact across language skills. Vocabulary and grammar dominate the literature, as they lend themselves easily to gamified drills and quizzes (Fithriani, R. 2021; Koç, G., & Sütçü, S. S., 2023). However, studies on speaking, listening, and writing though fewer highlight gamification's potential for higher-order skills. Serious games and immersive tasks, for example, improve fluency and comprehension (Khatoony, S., 2019; Bularafa, M. W., et al., 2024), while gamified feedback supports writing development (Laffey, D., 2022). When linked to Bloom's digital taxonomy, gamification scaffolds learners from lower-order remembering

(vocabulary recall) to higher-order creating (writing compositions). This progression confirms that gamification is not limited to rote practice but can support cognitive growth and creative production.

Towards a Conceptual Framework

Synthesizing the findings, this article proposes a conceptual framework (Figure 5) that integrates the five theoretical perspectives. In this model, gamification elements (points, badges, quests, narratives) drive motivation (SDT), sustain engagement (Flow), foster multimodal literacies (Multiliteracies), encourage reflection and identity shifts (Transformative Learning), and scaffold cognitive progression (Bloom's taxonomy). Together, these mechanisms lead to outcomes such as enhanced language skills, learner autonomy, and transformative educational experiences. This framework provides both explanatory power for researchers and practical guidance for educators.

Beyond motivational psychology, gamification research has been extended to other frameworks. Multiliteracies pedagogy (New London Group, 1996; Reinders & Wattana, 2015) emphasizes multimodal, interactive participation through digital game-based activities, while Bloom's digital taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) provides a lens to evaluate how gamification scaffolds learning from lower-order (e.g., vocabulary recall) to higher-order skills (e.g., writing compositions). A few studies also integrate transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991), suggesting that gamification may reshape learner identity and reflective practice, although this dimension remains underexplored.

Empirical findings consistently show that gamification enhances multiple dimensions of learner engagement. Behavioral engagement is fostered through increased participation in quizzes and tasks (Tsay et al., 2018), emotional engagement through enjoyment and persistence (Munday, 2016; Wang & Tahir, 2020), and cognitive engagement through reflection and problem-solving (Rodríguez et al., 2023). Across skills, the majority of studies focus on vocabulary and grammar, while speaking (Thuy & Hung, 2021), listening (Bularafa et al., 2024), and writing (Laffey, 2022) are less frequently studied but show promising results.

Despite positive outcomes, recurring challenges include declining motivation, context-specific applicability, and technology barriers. Studies relying on specific platforms such as Duolingo (Munday, 2016) or Kahoot! (Wang & Tahir, 2020) reveal tool-dependence issues that limit generalization. Other works highlight the need for teacher training and adequate infrastructure (Su & Cheng, 2015), especially in under-resourced contexts. These gaps point to the necessity of designing gamification not as superficial "pointsification" but as a sustainable pedagogy embedded within broader curricular and institutional frameworks.

Overall, the literature indicates that gamification has strong potential to transform ELT into a more engaging, learner-centered process, particularly when it is informed by robust theoretical foundations and carefully designed to balance intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. However, future research needs to address sustainability, broaden skill coverage beyond vocabulary and grammar, and explore its transformative potential in reshaping learner identity and literacy practices.

Implications for Practice and Research

For teachers, the findings emphasize the need to design gamified activities that go beyond pointsification and instead support autonomy, competence, and collaboration. For curriculum designers, gamification should be embedded in learning objectives, ensuring that it contributes to skill progression and not just engagement. For researchers, the gap lies in exploring gamification's long-term impact, its role in transformative learning, and its integration with critical digital literacies. Future research should adopt mixed-method designs and longitudinal approaches to capture not only immediate motivation but also sustained identity transformation and literacy development.

CONCLUSION

This study critically reviewed 25 peer-reviewed articles published between 2014 and 2024 to examine the role of gamification in English Language Teaching (ELT). Guided by four research questions, the review synthesized empirical findings and theoretical insights into a comprehensive conceptual framework.

The review demonstrates that gamification is most powerful when it is theoretically grounded. Self-Determination Theory and Flow Theory dominate the literature, showing how gamification nurtures autonomy, competence, relatedness, and optimal engagement. Yet, the

integration of multiliteracies pedagogy, transformative learning theory, and Bloom's digital taxonomy remains limited. This imbalance reveals a research gap: while motivational psychology is well developed, the broader educational dimensions of gamification are underexplored.

Gamification's transformative potential lies in its ability to shift ELT from teacher-centered to learner-centered practice. The reviewed studies consistently show that gamification enhances behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement, allowing learners to participate more actively, enjoy the learning process, and engage in reflective thinking. These outcomes align with the goals of 21st-century pedagogy, where learners are positioned as co-constructors of knowledge rather than passive recipients.

Despite these strengths, challenges remain. The novelty effect often limits sustainability, with motivation declining once extrinsic rewards lose their appeal. Context-specific tools like Duolingo or Kahoot, while effective in the short term, may not generalize across classrooms or cultural contexts. Moreover, technological barriers—ranging from device access to teacher training—continue to restrict equitable adoption. Addressing these challenges requires moving beyond superficial gamification ("pointsification") toward designs that embed reflection, autonomy, and identity transformation.

When mapped across ELT skills, gamification proves adaptable, supporting vocabulary, grammar, speaking, listening, and writing, though the balance remains uneven. Vocabulary and grammar dominate, while higher-order skills such as writing and speaking are underexplored but promising. Aligning gamification with Bloom's digital taxonomy illustrates how it can scaffold learners from lower-order skills (remembering) to higher-order competencies (creating and reflecting).

The contribution of this review is the development of a comprehensive conceptual framework that integrates five theories: SDT, Flow, Multiliteracies, Transformative Learning, and Bloom's. This framework clarifies how gamification elements (points, quests, narratives, feedback) can be systematically designed to enhance motivation, sustain engagement, develop multimodal literacies, foster reflective learning, and scaffold cognitive progression.

For educators, the findings encourage designing gamified tasks that go beyond rewards, focusing instead on fostering autonomy, collaboration, and creativity. For curriculum designers, gamification should be integrated into learning objectives to ensure coherence with pedagogical goals. For institutions, investment in infrastructure and teacher training is essential to ensure sustainable implementation.

Future studies should explore gamification's long-term impact, particularly its role in transformative learning and identity development. Mixed-method and longitudinal designs would help capture both immediate motivational effects and sustained changes in learner autonomy and literacy practices. Comparative studies across cultural and technological contexts could also shed light on issues of equity and scalability.

In sum, this article shows that gamification, when supported by robust theoretical frameworks and carefully aligned with pedagogical objectives, has the potential to transform ELT into a more engaging, reflective, and learner-centered practice. Moving forward, the challenge for both educators and researchers is to design gamification not as a superficial motivational tool, but as a transformative pedagogy that supports deep learning and prepares learners for the complexities of global communication.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to express their sincere appreciation to colleagues and academic mentors who provided valuable insights during the development of this study. Gratitude is also extended to the peer reviewers whose constructive feedback contributed to strengthening the quality and clarity of the manuscript. Although no specific institution directly supported this work, the intellectual encouragement from our academic community has been invaluable.

FUNDING STATEMENT

This research was conducted as an independent scholarly work. The authors declare that the study did not receive financial support from any funding agencies, institutions, or commercial entities. No external funding influenced the design, analysis, or reporting of the findings presented in this article.

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APPENDIX

Literature Matrix on Gamification in ELT

No	Author(s) & Year	Research Context	Participants	Gamification Elements	Theoretical Framework	Key Findings	Limitations / Gaps
1	Allam et al. (2022)	Grammar learning in secondary school	EFL secondary students	Gamified exercises, rewards	Not specified	Improved grammar competence	Focus on grammar only
2	Bai et al. (2021)	Online higher education	Online learners	Leaderboards, ranking positions	SDT, Motivation theories	Leaderboard position affects performance & motivation	Cultural/ individual differences

No	Author(s) & Year	Research Context	Participants	Gamification Elements	Theoretical Framework	Key Findings	Limitations / Gaps
3	Bularafa et al. (2024)	Listening skills (Nigeria)	Secondary EFL students	Gamification method, tasks	Constructivist	Improved listening comprehension	Localized context
4	Choi (2016)	Young EFL learners	Primary school students	Smart learning design, tasks	Flow Theory	Enhanced speaking skills	Small-scale
5	Csikszentmihalyi (1990)	Theoretical book	–	–	Flow Theory	Introduced flow state in learning	Not ELT-specific
6	Deterding et al. (2011)	Conceptual framework	–	Points, badges, leaderboards	Game design	Defined gamification as game element use in non-game context	Theoretical, not empirical
7	Dicheva et al. (2015)	Education (systematic review)	–	Mixed gamification	Motivation & engagement	Mapped gamification in education	Broad scope, not ELT-specific
8	Domínguez et al. (2013)	University blended courses	Undergraduates	Points, challenges, leaderboards	Engagement theory	Improved motivation short-term	Motivation declined later
9	Fithriani (2021)	Vocabulary learning	Indonesian EFL learners	Mobile gamification apps	Motivation theories	Increased vocabulary acquisition	Limited to mobile context
10	Hamari et al. (2014)	Gamification studies review	–	Mixed gamification	Motivation & engagement	Evidence gamification can improve motivation	Mixed methodologies
11	Hanus & Fox (2015)	Higher education	Undergraduates	Leaderboards, competition	SDT	Motivation initially ↑, later ↓	Not sustainable
12	Horwitz (2001)	Theoretical (language anxiety)	–	–	Affective filter	Language anxiety affects achievement	Not gamification-focused
13	Huang et al. (2019)	Flipped classrooms	EFL students	Badges, quests, challenges	SDT + Flow	Increased motivation & engagement	Limited context
14	Khatoony (2019)	VR-based serious games	EFL learners	VR games, tasks	Flow	Improved immersion & motivation	Requires technology
15	Koç & Sütçü (2023)	Grammar learning	Secondary school students	Points, badges	Motivation theory	Grammar proficiency improved	Narrow focus
16	Laffey (2022)	Writing skills	Korean EFL learners	Gamification apps	SDT	Motivation in writing ↑	Focus on motivation only

No	Author(s) & Year	Research Context	Participants	Gamification Elements	Theoretical Framework	Key Findings	Limitations / Gaps
17	Munday (2016)	Duolingo in ELT	University learners	Mobile app gamification	Language learning pedagogy	Increased persistence & practice	Tool-specific
18	Reinders & Wattana (2015)	Game-based communication	Thai university EFL students	Digital game-based tasks	Willingness to Communicate (WTC)	Increased WTC & affective engagement	Not gamification-only
19	Rodríguez et al. (2023)	Listening comprehension	EFL learners	Gamified listening strategies	Cognitive learning	Improved listening comprehension	Limited to listening
20	Saidgul & Mohammed (2024)	Motivation in ELT	EFL learners	Badges, points, tasks	Motivation theories	Improved learner motivation	Context-specific
21	Sailer et al. (2017)	Higher education	University students	Points, badges, leaderboards	SDT	Need satisfaction increased	Focused on short-term
22	Su & Cheng (2015)	Mobile gamified system	Secondary school EFL learners	Mobile gamification platform	Flow & SDT	Increased motivation & performance	Requires mobile tech
23	Thuy & Hung (2021)	Speaking skills	Teachers' perceptions	Gamification apps (Kahoot, Quizizz)	Teacher belief frameworks	Teachers positive about gamification	Perceptions, not learner data
24	Tsay et al. (2018)	Online learning	Undergraduates	Quizzes, badges	Gamification design	Engagement and learning improved	General, not ELT-specific
25	Wang & Tahir (2020)	Review of Kahoot!	–	Quizzes, leaderboards	Motivation & engagement	Kahoot! ↑ motivation & engagement	Tool-specific, narrow