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Gamifying the ESL Speaking Classroom: a Study of impact of Game Mechanics on Learning Behaviour of Undergraduate Students

Abstract

Today's University ESL classrooms comprise the Millennials, also known as Generation Y or the Digital Natives. This generation is generally marked by an increased use and familiarity with communications, media, and digital technologies. According to Debaro Huyler et al., they place an emphasis on finding a creative outlet; have high collaborative skills and have a preference for team-oriented environment and immediate feedback. Keeping these traits in mind, the ESL teachers must adopt new pedagogies that cater to the learning needs of this generation. Gamifying the ESL pedagogy is the most promising concept in this regard. This paper suggests new gamification strategies for ESL Speaking Classrooms. The paper is a result of the researcher's observations with the University Undergraduate students. These strategies augment learner engagement and motivation towards language acquisition.

Keywords: gamification, learner engagement, motivation, language acquisition

Introduction

Acquiring fluency in English language has become a prerequisite for employment and professional success in today's globalized work culture. Moreover, the learning behaviour and preferences of the new generation demonstrate a paradigm shift from those of the Generation X. This necessitates that the language educators integrate new concepts to motivate ESL learners in their quest of achieving fluency. Gamification is one of the most proficient techniques adaptable to the millennials in an ESL classroom.

Gamification is “the use of game design elements in non-game contexts”ⁱ intending to infuse tasks and processes with fun, play, and passion. Thus, the remodelled process embeds characteristics that are more commonly found in games, into the non-game activities. Thus Gamification can be defined as the embedding of “the motivational properties of games and layering them on top of other learning activities, integrating the human desire to communicate and share accomplishment with goal-setting to direct the attention of learners and motivate them to action”ⁱⁱ

The learners of the 21st century process the information differently, and the old educational patterns do not realize their needs. According to Brownⁱⁱⁱ, motivation is an essential personality factor that the learners need to facilitate the second language acquisition. While most of the existing strategies fail to efficiently meet this essential factor in the teaching process, Gamification constantly facilitates intrinsic as well as extrinsic motivation.

The present study focuses specifically on the implications of the strategy of Gamification on the ESL Speaking classroom.

Methodology

A qualitative research methodology was applied wherein 216 students of different undergraduate courses, who were taught using Game Mechanics in their ESL Speaking

sessions by the researcher, constituted the sample size. The data was collected through semi structured interviews with the respondents.

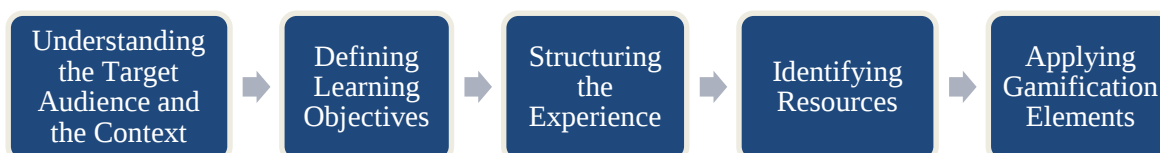
The researcher gamified three specific speaking-activities of the ESL classroom. The lesson plan was so designed that the intrinsic features of game: the desire to communicate, motivation, group dynamics and sense of shared accomplishments could be brought into classroom context. The researcher had taught the learners through conventional methods for three months prior to the experimental session, and their initial language achievement level was available. This made the mapping of the study results more reasonable as well as reliable.

Discussion

Second Language Acquisition cannot be achieved unless the learners feel stimulated to participate in communicative activities without any qualms of failure or criticism. This necessitates that the ESL classes comprise an assortment of communicative activities, particularly designed for cooperative work, that present challenges to the learners and require joint participation for their successful execution.

The prime elements of almost all modern games that make them exciting for the young generation are: badges, points, progress bars, quests, levels, social elements, and rewards.

The instructions for the ESL Speaking Classes under the study were designed on the basis of the Educational Gamification Five Step Model presented by Huang and Soman (2013)^{iv}.



Pre-Test And Team Formation

In order to ensure maximum participation, it was necessary to create equivalent heterogeneous teams out of the class. This was achieved by evaluating the initial language fluency levels of students through an extempore speech which was graded on a scale of 10, sorting the scores in A, B, C, D, E and F categories, and creating equivalent teams, each comprising at least one member of each category. This was ensured that each team had comparable constitution of members on their language competence.

THE GAMIFICATION SCHEME

The important elements of Gamification - badges, quests, points, progress bars, levels, social elements, and rewards were applied in the structure of the Speaking activities in the following manner:

Badges – each team was asked to decide a team name, and team logo.

Quests – challenging tasks were so designed that their execution would necessitate rigorous communication among the teammates.

Points and progress bars – there were points allotted at successful completion of the assigned task, and the scores were projected on a PowerPoint slide.

Levels – each task had four levels; each successive level requiring a higher level of language fluency, vocabulary and critical thinking for completion.

Social elements – the tasks were so designed that each member of the team had to speak in succession, thus promoting mutual cooperation and motivation.

Rewards – the feelings of winning, recognition and accomplishment were the reward elements.

Execution

Activity 1: Changed Identity

Duration – 3 hours (3 sessions, each lasting one hour)

Objectives – Teaching Barriers to Communication, Telephonic Communication, Clarity, Coherence and You-attitude

Materials – Blind fold, a paper head band, flash cards, projector, board and marker

Procedure – each team nominates one member who will be blindfolded and will sit in a chair in front of the class, wearing a paper head-band. A flash card showing a new identity of this member is then inserted in the headband. It could be a fruit, a vegetable, a scientific term or an abstract idea with respect to the increasing difficulty levels. The team members are now required to explain the new identity of the member using relevant examples, definitions or anecdotes. Each team member has to speak in succession for 15 seconds. This time increases with increasing difficulty level. The task is to be completed within 2 minutes after which, the blindfolded member has to guess his new identity. The team gets points if the member guesses the word correctly.

Activity 2: The Placement Battle

Duration – 4 hours (4 sessions, each lasting one hour)

Objectives – Teaching Employment Communication, Negotiation Skills, Analytical approach, Leadership and Team Work

Materials – 6-8 chairs, projector, board and marker

Procedure – A video (a short documentary or news clip) of 2-3 minutes is shown to the students. A time of 3 minutes is given for the teams to brainstorm on the issue raised in the video. Now each team is asked to nominate one representative to participate in a group discussion on the issue. A group discussion is held between the team representatives. A panel of students act as selectors. While the team representatives discuss, the teams listen and records the performance of their candidate. After a discussion of 6-8 minutes, each team advocates the selection of their candidate by highlighting his strengths. For this a time of 1

minute is allotted to each team. At the end, the selection panel declares the selection of the best two candidates. Successful teams get points which are shown on the leaderboard.

This exercise is carried out in several rounds till each member of each team has participated.

Activity 3 – Get it Drawn

Duration – 3 hours (3 sessions, each lasting one hour)

Objectives – Teaching Listening Skills, Speaking With Logic, Elucidation, and You- Attitude

Materials – Flash cards, white board, board marker, and duster

Procedure – one member of Team A is brought to the board and is asked to freeze there (he can neither turn around to face his team-mates nor can he speak). The other members are then given a geometrical step-by-step drawing made on a flash card. The remaining members of team A discuss and locate the different steps that form the drawing, and then instruct their team member standing at the board (who cannot see the drawing) to produce the same drawing on the board step-by-step. 2 minutes are allotted to each team to complete the task. The team gets points based on two aspects – number of steps completed in the drawing, and accuracy.

The exercise is carried out in several rounds with increasing levels of difficulty till each member of each team has participated.

The drawings were selected according to the study domain of the students. For the students of engineering, they were complex geometrical constructions whereas for commerce graduates, they were bar-graphs, histograms etc.

OBSERVATIONS

It was observed that the learners displayed increased enthusiasm and willingness to speak English Language in the Gamified classroom structure. Since there were Game-Elements like challenge, goal, competition and group dynamics embedded in the lesson plan, the students willingly collaborated to score the highest, thus learning from each other. Furthermore, as the

completion of each task necessitated each member to speak, and the contribution of each member added to the team score, there were both intrinsic and extrinsic levels of motivation existing among the learners.

POST TEST

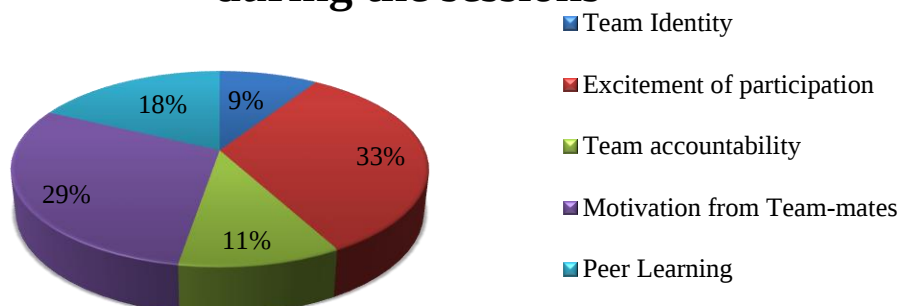
The achievement level of the learners was assessed through a post test. The test platform was extempore speech on topics selected through lottery system. Improvement in Linguistic Competence, Nonverbal Communication Skills, Fluency and Confidence was recorded and graded.

FINDINGS

A semi-structured interview was conducted with the learners to appraise the efficacy of the model. The learners' views pertaining to their experience and the effectiveness of the pedagogy are presented in the graph below. Their responses to the question "Which factors motivated you the most to learn and speak English language during the sessions?" could generally be categorised into: Team Identity, Excitement of participation, Team accountability, Motivation from Team-mates and Peer Learning.

Maximum percentage of students, as many as 33% (68/216) responded that the most effective and helpful part of the new learning environment was the Excitement of Participation. The class was charged with so much of excitement that even the most reticent learners felt excited to speak. 29% (61/216) said that it was the motivation from the team-mates that promoted their learning. Peer learning was stated by 18% (37/216) of the learners as an important factor that helped them learn speaking faster. As it was a competitive environment, as many as 20% (41/216) of the learners felt motivated because of the Team Identity and Team Accountability. They said that, despite their inhibitions, they felt obliged to take part in the speaking activity, as their participation would add to the team scores.

Which Factors Motivated You the most to Learn and Speak English language during the sessions



CONCLUSION

The proposed pedagogical strategy of Gamifying an ESL Speaking Classroom promises an amplified probability of enhanced and voluntary language acquisition. While playing Games, the players are motivated to augment their performance through several game elements like badges, quests, points, progress bars, levels, social elements, and rewards; embedding these elements into an ESL lesson plan promises a better learner engagement and motivation. The learners, in a Gamified ESL classroom work cooperatively in mutual concord, motivate each other's accomplishment, learn to value each other's ability, give valuable feedback and help each other develop. It also encourages the reticent learners to rid their inhibitions, which is crucial to second language acquisition, especially speaking segment.

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