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THE ROLE OF LEADERBOARDS AND REWARDS IN SHAPING GROUP INTERACTION IN ESP CLASSROOMS

Annotation

This article examines the role of leaderboards and rewards in shaping group interaction in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) classrooms. With the growing use of gamification in education, ESP teaching is increasingly influenced by tools designed to enhance learner motivation and classroom engagement. The study adopts a qualitative approach to analyze theoretical literature on gamification, instructional design, and classroom communication.

Keywords: gamification, ESP, leaderboards, rewards, group interaction, classroom communication, learner motivation, student engagement, collaboration, classroom dynamics.

РОЛЬ РЕЙТИНГОВЫХ ТАБЛИЦ И НАГРАД В ФОРМИРОВАНИИ ГРУППОВОГО ВЗАИМОДЕЙСТВИЯ НА ЗАНЯТИЯХ ESP

Аннотация

В данной статье рассматривается роль рейтинговых таблиц и наград в формировании группового взаимодействия на занятиях по английскому языку для специальных целей (ESP). В условиях возрастающего применения геймификации в образовании преподавание ESP всё чаще опирается на инструменты, направленные на повышение мотивации учащихся и их активности на занятиях. Исследование основано на качественном подходе и включает анализ теоретической литературы по геймификации, педагогическому дизайну и коммуникации в классе.

Ключевые слова: геймификация, ESP, рейтинговые таблицы, награды, групповое взаимодействие, коммуникация в классе, мотивация обучающихся, вовлечённость студентов, сотрудничество, динамика класса.

ESP DARSLARIDA REYTING JADVALLARI VA MUKOFOTLARNING GURUH ICHIDAGI O'ZARO TA'SIRNI SHAKLLANTIRISHDAGI O'RNI

Annotatsiya

Ushbu maqolada maxsus maqsadlar uchun ingliz tili (ESP) darslarida reyting jadvallari va mukofotlarning guruh ichidagi o'zaro ta'sirni shakllantirishdagi roli tahlil qilinadi. Ta'limda gamifikatsiya elementlarining keng qo'llanilishi natijasida ESP o'qitish jarayoni ham o'quvchilar motivatsiyasi va darsdagi faollikni oshirishga qaratilgan yangi vositalar bilan boyib bormoqda. Tadqiqotda gamifikatsiya, pedagogik dizayn va sinfdagi muloqotga oid nazariy adabiyotlarni tahlil qilishga asoslangan sifatlari yondashuv qo'llanildi.

Kalit so'zlar: gamifikatsiya, ESP, reyting jadvallari, mukofotlar, guruhiy o'zaro ta'sir, sinfdagi muloqot, o'quvchi motivatsiyasi, o'quvchilar faolligi, hamkorlik, sinf dinamikasi.

Introduction. In contemporary language education, increasing attention has been given to learner engagement, participation, and communicative effectiveness. This tendency is particularly visible in English for Specific Purposes (ESP), where language learning is closely tied to professional, academic, or occupational communication. Unlike general language instruction, ESP focuses not only on grammatical development but also on purposeful interaction in context-specific situations (Harmer, 2007). As a result, classroom design in ESP must support both linguistic competence and meaningful social participation. One of the most influential developments in recent educational practice is gamification. In broad terms, gamification refers to the integration of game-like elements into non-game contexts in order to influence behavior, increase motivation, and sustain engagement (Werbach & Hunter, 2012). In educational settings, common gamification elements include points, badges, rewards, progress indicators, and leaderboards. These features are generally introduced to make learning more interactive and to encourage learners to participate more actively in classroom tasks (Kapp, 2012).

Despite the growing popularity of gamification, scholarly discussion has often focused more on its impact on individual motivation than on its influence on collective learning processes. This creates an important gap, especially in ESP education, where students frequently work in pairs and groups, engage in discussion, negotiate meaning, and simulate real professional communication. In such environments, learning is inherently social. Therefore, the role of gamification should be examined not only in relation to personal achievement, but also in relation to group interaction, classroom relations, and collaborative behavior (Kim et al., 2017). Among the various elements of gamification, leaderboards and rewards are especially influential because they make achievement visible and connect performance with recognition. These elements may increase participation and encourage learners to become more active in communicative tasks. However, they may also alter the balance between cooperation and competition. In some cases, public ranking may stimulate effort and engagement; in others, it may create pressure, anxiety, or inequality among learners (Werbach & Hunter, 2012). For this reason, the

pedagogical role of leaderboards and rewards in ESP classrooms deserves careful and systematic consideration.

Literature Review. The theoretical discussion of gamification in education has developed considerably over the last decade. One of the most influential scholars in this field, Kapp, argues that gamification should be understood as a serious instructional strategy rather than as the superficial addition of game-like features to classroom activities (Kapp, 2012). According to him, points, badges, and leaderboards become pedagogically effective only when they are directly linked to meaningful learning objectives. This idea is especially important in ESP education, where classroom tasks are expected to reflect authentic professional communication and purposeful language use. Kapp further emphasizes that the educational impact of gamification depends on design. If game elements are introduced without instructional coherence, they may distract learners from real communicative goals. However, when they are tied to clear outcomes, such as the accurate use of target vocabulary, active participation in discussions, or collaborative problem-solving, they can reinforce productive language behavior (Kapp, 2012). In this sense, Kapp's work provides a strong theoretical basis for understanding leaderboards and rewards as pedagogical instruments rather than entertainment devices. Werbach and Hunter develop this discussion by approaching gamification as a behavioral system that shapes motivation through recognition, competition, feedback, and social comparison (Werbach & Hunter, 2012). Their framework is particularly relevant to leaderboards because public ranking makes performance visible and may therefore influence how learners position themselves within a group. In classroom settings, this visibility can increase effort and engagement. Yet the same mechanism may also produce negative effects, such as pressure, frustration, or unhealthy competition. Werbach and Hunter therefore stress that gamification always has a dual nature: it can motivate, but it can also distort behavior if poorly implemented (Werbach & Hunter, 2012). Kim et al. contribute an important psychological and educational perspective. Their work emphasizes that gamification should encourage learner growth, reduce fear of failure, and support progress-oriented participation (Kim et al., 2017). This is highly relevant to ESP classrooms, where many learners hesitate to speak because they are afraid of making mistakes in front of peers. Reward systems that recognize effort, improvement, and contribution may reduce anxiety and create a more inclusive classroom atmosphere. Kim et al. also point out that the effectiveness of gamification depends on learner perception. Adults, professionals, and learners from different educational backgrounds may react differently to competitive systems, and therefore one gamified model cannot be assumed to work equally well for all learners (Kim et al., 2017). Taken together, these studies show that gamification has significant potential in education, but they also make clear that its impact on group interaction is complex. Existing scholarship has largely focused on motivation and individual engagement, while less attention has been given to how leaderboards and rewards influence cooperation, group communication, and classroom dynamics in ESP learning. This gap provides the rationale for the present study.

Method and Methodology. This study is based on a qualitative theoretical-analytical methodology. Rather than collecting numerical classroom data, it examines existing theoretical perspectives on gamification, educational design, learner motivation, and classroom interaction, and applies them to the context of ESP instruction. This approach is appropriate because the article aims to interpret how specific gamification elements function pedagogically and socially within group-oriented language learning environments. The conceptual basis

of the analysis is drawn from several major scholars whose works have shaped current understanding of gamification in education. Kapp's perspective is central to the instructional dimension of the study. He argues that gamification should be viewed not as the simple addition of entertaining activities, but as a structured instructional strategy connected to learning goals (Kapp, 2012). According to this view, game elements become educationally meaningful only when they support specific pedagogical outcomes. In ESP classrooms, this means that rewards and leaderboards should be linked to relevant communicative achievements, such as appropriate use of professional vocabulary, active participation in task-based discussions, and successful collaboration during group work (Kapp, 2012). A second important methodological perspective is provided by Werbach and Hunter, who define gamification as a behavioral system based on motivation, competition, recognition, and feedback (Werbach & Hunter, 2012). Their approach is useful in the present study because it explains how visible performance indicators may influence learners' willingness to contribute within a group. Leaderboards, in particular, are interpreted as tools of social comparison. In educational terms, this comparison may either stimulate effort or create pressure, depending on how the system is designed (Werbach & Hunter, 2012). In addition, the methodological framework is strengthened by Schell's design-based approach. Schell emphasizes that game elements are effective only when they are embedded in a coherent system built on challenge, fairness, feedback, and meaningful interaction (Schell, 2008). This principle is particularly important in ESP instruction, where classroom tasks are usually designed around practical communication and real-life professional situations. From this perspective, leaderboards and rewards should support the learning process rather than dominate it (Schell, 2008).

Thus, the methodology of the study is interpretive, comparative, and pedagogically oriented. It does not seek to quantify classroom behavior, but to explain how and why leaderboards and rewards may shape interactional patterns in ESP learning.

Discussion. The discussion of the issue reveals that leaderboards and rewards influence ESP classrooms not merely as technical tools but as social and pedagogical mechanisms. Their significance lies in the fact that they alter how learners perceive participation, achievement, and cooperation within the classroom community. In ESP settings, where interaction is often goal-directed and professionally relevant, this influence becomes especially important. From an instructional perspective, leaderboards and rewards can help structure participation. In many ESP classrooms, some learners tend to dominate discussions while others remain passive. A well-designed reward system can make participation more visible and encourage quieter students to contribute. When learners know that their communicative effort, use of target terminology, and collaboration are acknowledged, they may become more willing to engage in pair and group tasks (Kapp, 2012). This supports the view that gamification may function as a catalyst for communicative activation. However, the discussion also shows that not all forms of gamification are equally beneficial. Individual leaderboards, while potentially motivating for highly competitive learners, may weaken group cohesion by shifting attention from collaboration to personal ranking. In ESP classrooms, where communicative tasks often resemble team-based professional scenarios, overly individualized competition may distort the intended learning environment (Werbach & Hunter, 2012). Learners may focus on outperforming classmates rather than supporting the group process. For this reason, team-based leaderboards appear more suitable in many ESP contexts because they preserve collective

responsibility and foster shared achievement (Kapp, 2013). The ethical dimension of gamification also emerges as an important issue. Public comparison may produce unintended psychological effects. Learners with lower proficiency levels may interpret low ranking as failure, which may reduce confidence and willingness to participate. This is particularly significant in ESP settings involving adult learners or professionals, who may be more sensitive to public evaluation than younger students (Kim et al., 2017). Therefore, fairness, transparency, and sensitivity to learner background are essential conditions for effective implementation (Schell, 2008). Another issue concerns the nature of rewards. If rewards are attached only to final success, they may favor stronger learners and reinforce classroom inequality. By contrast, if rewards are linked to effort, progress, participation, and teamwork, they may contribute to a more inclusive learning atmosphere. Such an approach aligns more closely with communicative language teaching and with the pedagogical logic of ESP, where meaningful performance matters more than superficial competition (Harmer, 2007; Kim et al., 2017).

Results. The analysis of the selected theoretical perspectives leads to several important results.

First, leaderboards and rewards can significantly increase learner participation in ESP classrooms. By making effort and achievement visible, they create stronger incentives for students to contribute actively to discussions, role plays, simulations, and task-based group activities (Kapp, 2012; Werbach & Hunter, 2012). This increased participation is especially valuable in ESP education, where communicative practice is central to language development.

Second, gamification can improve classroom communication when rewards are tied to meaningful linguistic and interactional behavior. Learners are more likely to use target vocabulary, engage in discussion, and support peers when such actions are recognized as valuable. In this sense, gamification may function not only as a motivational strategy but also as a communicative scaffold (Kapp, 2012).

Third, the results indicate that team-based and progress-oriented gamification models are more effective than purely individual and rank-based systems. Group leaderboards and collaborative rewards appear to strengthen cohesion, reduce the isolating effects of competition, and support more balanced

participation. This is particularly relevant in ESP learning, where communication often mirrors real-world teamwork and professional cooperation (Kapp, 2013; Schell, 2008).

Conclusion. The present article has examined the role of leaderboards and rewards in shaping group interaction in ESP classrooms. The analysis has shown that gamification has significant potential to support communicative language learning, but its value lies not in the novelty of game elements themselves, rather in the way they are pedagogically designed and socially managed. Leaderboards and rewards can enhance learner participation, strengthen communicative engagement, and stimulate more active involvement in group tasks. They may also provide immediate feedback and increase learners' awareness of progress. In ESP environments, these effects are particularly important because language learning is closely connected with interaction, collaboration, and professionally relevant communication (Kapp, 2012; Harmer, 2007). At the same time, the study has demonstrated that gamification is not automatically beneficial. Poorly designed systems may intensify competition, create anxiety, weaken cooperation, and lead to unequal participation. In ESP classrooms, where teamwork and practical communication are essential, such negative outcomes may seriously undermine the instructional process (Werbach & Hunter, 2012; Kim et al., 2017).

The article therefore concludes that leaderboards and rewards should be implemented strategically, ethically, and in alignment with instructional goals. Team-based, progress-oriented, and communication-centered reward structures are especially suitable for ESP contexts. Such models help transform gamification from a purely motivational device into a meaningful pedagogical instrument that supports both language acquisition and positive group dynamics (Schell, 2008; Kapp, 2013).

In broader terms, the findings suggest that gamification in ESP education should be understood as a structured form of instructional design that shapes not only motivation, but also interactional culture within the classroom. When applied thoughtfully, it can become a powerful means of creating more active, inclusive, and communicatively effective ESP learning environments.

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