

TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF DIGITAL GAMIFICATION FOR VOCABULARY LEARNING: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This study explores teachers' voices toward the Implementation of Digital Gamification (DG) in the context of vocabulary mastery among young English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Learners. Employing qualitative thematic analysis, this research delves into the experiences of teachers at a junior high school in Malang, based on data from semi-structured interviews. The findings on the benefits consistently highlighted two key themes: (1) enhanced vocabulary retention as perceived by teachers through enjoyable, repetitive exposure, and (2) enhanced learner motivation and engagement caused by interactive game-based activities. However, the implementation is impeded by several prominent challenges. The teachers' voices pointed to significant technological barriers (unstable internet, device shortages), severe time constraints related to preparing and adapting game content, and issues managing young learners' off-task behavior or excessive competitive stress. The study concludes that while teachers acknowledge the substantial pedagogical value of DG, successful integration requires systemic support to mitigate the identified technical and practical challenges, particularly in supporting students' vocabulary development and addressing technological barriers in learning activities, and also solving the technological barriers in learning activity

Keywords: Digital gamification; teachers' perspective; vocabulary learning

INTRODUCTION

The significance of teaching vocabulary in language classrooms is highlighted by the process of language development in learning English (Guilherme, 2007). However, the majority of vocabulary instruction uses contextualized or conventional approaches (Sadeghi et al., 2022). The fundamental meaning of the word in context is one of the numerous relevant aspects that scholars have identified. One of the most important things that experts in the field of language learning and comprehension have found is the underlying meaning of a word in context. Knowing how a term works in a particular context helps learners to understand its

subtle meanings, avoid misunderstandings, and use vocabulary more appropriately when communicating. Such contextual awareness facilitates deeper linguistic proficiency and better use of language (Alharbi, 2023). The learner's curiosity, the range of contextual cues, and their prior vocabulary (Laufer and Hadar, 1997; Nation and Kyongho, 1995)

Increasing students' vocabulary using engaging technology-based learning materials is one of the challenges instruction activities that English teachers are currently experiencing because they are supposed to help students become innovative. It is essential to leverage technical skill of digital

literacy dealing with technology tool usage for EFL teachers in order to facilitate technology-integrated teaching and learning. Comprehending the unique characteristics of contemporary pupils in contrast to previous generations is essential for educators seeking to engage and sustain their attention successfully. Students' preferences are shifting rapidly due to the widespread availability of ICT (Insani et al., 2024). ICT integration into teaching methods, particularly in language acquisition, is a realistic strategy to promote sustained interest and active involvement in the classroom (Barokati et al., 2018).

Dealing with technology based instruction in classroom, all skills of learning English should be considered to be adjusted with the current trend usage of digital concepts. Teaching English in improving mastery of vocabulary is an essential part of English language learning since it supports students' capacity to speak, read texts, and improve other language skills (Alharbi, 2023). However, in some schools, vocabulary instruction is still based on traditional and repetitious strategies that frequently fail to engage students meaningfully. As a result, learners usually lack enthusiasm and have inadequate vocabulary and memory.

In response to these challenges, the use of digital technologies has grown in importance in language instruction. Among these advancements, digital gamification (DG) stands out as a viable technique. Gamification is the use of game elements like points, badges, feedback systems, and challenges in non-game settings to increase user engagement and motivation. In language learning, DG offers interactive and multimodal experiences that can aid vocabulary acquisition through repetition, feedback, and purposeful application.

Numerous studies carried out in the past have consistently proved that the use of

digital gamification enhances the final results of vocabulary learning as well as the motivation of students. However, the majority of this research has focused on quantitative measures of student achievement, paid little attention to the experiential and contextual perspectives of teachers who use these tools in actual classrooms, and has mostly focused on quantitative measures of performance.

At the same time, the successful implementation of digital gamification is dependent not just on its instructional design, but also on teachers' views, technological readiness, and classroom circumstances. Teachers have a critical role in determining how gamification is adopted, adapted, and perpetuated in practice (Chu, et.,al.). As a result, knowing teachers' experiences is critical for developing a deeper understanding of digital gamification in language teaching.

Although previous research has established the efficacy of digital gamification in improving vocabulary learning and student engagement (Al-Khresheh, 2025; Bacsa-Károlyi & Fehérvári, 2024), a crucial gap exists in knowing how teachers experience and interpret its use in everyday classroom settings.

Most existing research prioritizes learning results and student opinions, but teachers' perspectives are frequently underrepresented, especially in qualitative depth. This introduces a theoretical restriction because the success of instructional innovations is inextricably related to teachers' cognition, beliefs, and decision-making processes.

Furthermore, previous research has rarely looked at digital gamification through integrated theoretical lens that links motivation, technological adoption, and pedagogical practice. Without this lens, it is difficult to explain why and how

gamification works—or fails—in various classroom situations (Cai, et.al., 2022).

Therefore, this study addresses this gap by exploring teachers' lived experiences with digital gamification through a qualitative approach, with the goal of contributing to a more nuanced and theoretically informed understanding of digital gamification in EFL contexts.

In current implementation of Curriculum *Merdeka* in Indonesia, students are expected to be active participants and not just recipients of information (Coryunitha Panis et al., 2025; Pramesworo et al., 2023). Based on the previous studies mentioned, most of the studies demonstrated the effectiveness of DG on vocabulary acquisition outcomes, which remains a critical qualitative gap in understanding the lived experiences and practical perceptions of the EFL teachers themselves. Research has often overlooked the detailed 'voices' of these key pedagogical stakeholders, failing to fully capture their daily benefits, contextual struggles, and their decision to integrate DG instruction. Therefore, this current research focused on teachers' voices on the use of DG in improving students' vocabulary. Based on the previous studies that have been stated, the current study tries to answer the following questions:

1. What benefits do teachers perceive in using digital gamification for vocabulary learning?
2. What challenges do teachers encounter when implementing digital gamification in EFL classrooms?

METHOD

This study used a qualitative research approach to investigate instructors' perspectives and experiences with the use of digital gamification (DG) in vocabulary education. A qualitative technique was judged appropriate because the study's goal is to get a thorough knowledge of teachers'

viewpoints, interpretations, and contextual challenges rather than to quantify variables quantitatively.

Specifically, this study used theme analysis to carefully explore patterns in instructors' accounts. Thematic analysis enables researchers to uncover, evaluate, and understand recurring themes in qualitative data, making it ideal for investigating complex educational phenomena like technology integration and teacher experiences. By concentrating on teachers' perspectives, this study hopes to provide rich, descriptive insights into both the perceived benefits and limitations of DG in real-world classroom settings.

Data had been collected via semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to expound on their experiences while ensuring that essential issues such as digital gamification, vocabulary development, and classroom implementation were consistently addressed. This strategy allowed the researcher to investigate not only what teachers go through, but also how they perceive and respond to those experiences in their teaching practices.

The study takes an interpretive approach, recognizing how instructors' experiences are influenced by their beliefs, technical readiness, and classroom surroundings. As a result, the analysis prioritizes meaning-making and contextual comprehension over generalization. This technique intends to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how EFL teachers perceive and implement digital gamification.

Theoretical Foundation of Digital Gamification

a. Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan established Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which analyses human motivation in terms of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Autonomy is the experience of having control over one's actions, competence is the feeling of efficacy and achievement, and relatedness is the social connection with others.

These requirements are actively supported within the context of digital gamification (DG). Gamified environments enable students to make decisions (autonomy), receive quick feedback and rewards like as points or levels (competence), and interact or compete with their classmates (relatedness). As a result, DG encourages intrinsic motivation, which is required for continuous engagement in vocabulary learning. This theoretical perspective helps to explain why integrating gamification into language learning activities increases student motivation and engagement.

b. Gamification Framework

Gamification is the use of game design principles in non-game environments to improve user engagement and motivation. According to Sebastian Deterding and colleagues, gamification uses structured features like points, badges, leaderboards, and feedback systems to produce meaningful and entertaining experiences.

These elements are considered part of a "engagement loop," in which students are constantly encouraged to participate, receive feedback, and improve their performance. Such regular engagement is critical for vocabulary development because retention is dependent on frequent exposure and practice. As a result, gamification frameworks provide a pedagogical mechanism that promotes both behavioral engagement and cognitive reinforcement, so increasing the interaction and effectiveness of learning.

c. Teacher Cognition Theory

Teacher cognition theory examines the beliefs, knowledge, and thought processes that influence teachers' instructional

decisions. Based on Simon Borg, teacher cognition refers to what teachers think, know, and believe, as well as how these mental constructions influence their classroom practices.

In the context of DG, teacher cognition is crucial in selecting whether and how to employ gamification. Teachers' attitudes toward technology, student involvement, and educational efficacy influence their propensity to implement DG. Furthermore, their prior experiences and contextual constraints influence how they implement gamification tactics in real-world classroom situations. This approach is critical for understanding the differences in teachers' attitudes to DG implementation, including both enthusiasm and resistance.

d. Technology Acceptance Model (TAM)

The Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), proposed by Fred D. Davis, explains how users come to accept and use new technologies. The model highlights two key variables: perceived utility and perceived ease of use. Perceived usefulness refers to a person's belief that utilizing a specific technology will improve their performance, whereas perceived ease of use refers to how simple the technology is to use.

In this study, TAM contributes to teachers' acceptance of digital gamification instruments. Teachers are more likely to use DG into their instruction if they believe it is beneficial for enhancing students' vocabulary learning and simple to use. In contrast, technological obstacles, a lack of resources, or complexity may limit their readiness to implement DG. As a result, TAM provides an effective framework for examining both the adoption and problems of gamification in educational settings.

Participants and Sampling

The participants of this study were three English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers at the junior high school level who

had experience using digital gamification in their teaching practices.

The participants were selected through purposive sampling, based on the following criteria:

1. Having a minimum of five years of teaching experience
2. Having regular experience using digital gamification tools in vocabulary instruction
3. Teaching English at the junior high school level
4. Being willing to participate and reflect on their teaching practices.

Although the number of participants is limited, qualitative research prioritizes depth over breadth, and a small sample size is appropriate for generating rich, detailed insights into participants' experiences.

Table 1. Participants' profile

Code	Gender	Teaching Experience	DG Experience
P1	Female	16 years	Yes
P2	Male	10 years	Yes
P3	Female	20 years	Yes

express their perspectives while ensuring that critical subjects were covered consistently. The interview questions focused on two major topics: (1) the perceived benefits of adopting digital gamification in vocabulary learning, and (2) the hurdles faced during implementation.

Each interview lasted about 30-45 minutes and was performed in a language that the participants understood to ensure clarity and depth of responses. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis with the consent of the participants.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed using thematic analysis following the framework proposed

by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis involved six stages:

1. Familiarization with the data.

The researchers began by reading and re-reading the interview transcripts to gain a deep understanding of the content.

2. Generating initial codes.

Significant information related to teachers' experiences in using DG. This process helped organize the data and highlight relevant insights.

3. Searching for themes.

The researcher analyzed the codes to find patterns and connections, categorizing the data into themes related to the benefits and also the challenges. The themes were refined to ensure clarity and continuity.

4. Reviewing themes.

Examining the themes were examined to ensure the accuracy of the analysis. Themes that did not contribute to understanding the participants' experiences were refined.

5. Defining and naming themes.

The ultimate themes were named and described based on the participants' experiences. Each theme was carefully aligned with the study's purpose and research questions

6. Producing the report.

After completing all the previous steps, the final report was written, interpreting the data and explaining the significance of the themes concerning mastering vocabulary.

The following questions were used as a semi-structured interview guide to explore teachers' experiences with Digital Gamification (DG). These questions were not used as participant selection criteria, but rather as the instruments for data collection.

Table 2. Question guideline

No	Codes	Questions list
1.	Benefits	1. What do you see as the main benefits of using DG for teaching English? 2. Do you believe DG is more effective in enlarging students' vocabulary for some students? If so, why? 3. Do you believe students are retaining vocabulary better when it is learned through gamified activities? Why or why not?
2.	Challenge	1. Can you discuss any technical barriers you have encountered? (Wi-Fi, device access, software issues) 2. What are the biggest challenges you face when trying to integrate DG into your learning activity?

The study analyzes two primary features of digital games (DG) use in English language instruction, namely their benefits and obstacles through the interview. The questions in terms of advantages are intended to explore teachers' perceptions on the pedagogical value of digital games, especially to ease learning vocabulary, to enhance retention and to raise students' motivation and engagement. We also want teachers to think about whether digital games are better suited to some types of learners and how these technologies create relevant learning settings and foster interaction in the classroom. In contrast, the challenges section examines the problems encountered by teachers when incorporating digital games into their teaching.

These include technical problems like internet access and the availability of devices, as well as pedagogical issues such as matching games to learning goals, managing classroom activities, and evaluating student performance. It also takes into account the preparedness and confidence of teachers to use digital technologies, scheduling restrictions and the issue of unequal access to technology by students. Combined, these questions offer a thorough insight into the

potential and limitations of digital games in English language teaching.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Several measures were used to guarantee that the findings were reliable and trustworthy. Careful transcribing and regular engagement with the facts helped to increase credibility. To ensure the correctness of interpretations, participants were given summaries of the findings to review. Dependability was addressed by providing a clear and open description of the study methodology. In addition, the researcher practiced reflexivity by admitting potential biases and ensuring that interpretations were based on data.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly followed throughout the research. Prior to participating, participants were informed about the research's goal and gave their informed consent. Their identities were concealed by the use of pseudonyms (P1, P2, P3), and all information was kept confidential. Participants also have the choice to withdraw from the study at any time with no penalties.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

Thematic analysis of the interview data indicated two key themes about the benefits of digital gamification (DG) and three themes about the challenges teachers face when using it. These themes were developed through rigorous categorization and refinement using Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach.

1. Perceived Benefits of Digital Gamification

1.1 Enhanced Vocabulary Retention

All participants consistently reported that DG helps pupils retain words more efficiently. This was mostly due to the repetition, instant feedback, and interactive practice built into gamified exercises.

Participant 1 stated that students "remember words longer because they practice

through games without feeling bored," but Participant 2 stressed that regular exposure to gamified assignments helps students recall vocabulary more quickly in speaking and writing. Similarly, Participant 3 emphasized the importance of timely feedback in helping students correct mistakes and promote learning.

The results of these research would demonstrate that DG promotes active engagement with words through a process of repetition, which ultimately results in increased memory retention. pupils are more likely to retain information for longer lengths of time if they are given the opportunity to actively interact with words in dynamic conditions rather than simply memorizing them passively. This is because pupils are more likely to be engaged in productive activities.

1.2 Increased Motivation and Engagement

The second aspect that is very important is the influence DG has on the level of motivation that individual has. Teachers also noted that youngsters were more enthusiastic, confident and passionate as they engaged in gamified activities. That's a direct result of their involvement." It was discovered after the young people had taken part in these activities.

Contrary to the remark made by Participant 1, who stated that students were "more excited to join the lesson," Participant 2 explained that DG promotes students to repeat activities on their own will. Participant 1 believed that students were more excited to participate in the session. The third participant underlined that DG produces a learning environment that is less stressful and more fun, which in turn fosters student participation on the part of the students.

The classroom looks to be transformed into a more interactive learning environment as a result of the use of digital gamification. This classroom environment is one in which students are encouraged to actively participate rather than merely receiving information in a passive manner. On the basis of the evidence presented here, this conclusion can be drawn.

2. Challenges in Implementing Digital Gamification

2.1 Time and Pedagogical Demands

All participants agreed that applying DG involves extensive planning, including designing, choosing, and customizing relevant games for instructional objectives.

Participant 1 noted that selecting appropriate games "takes a lot of time," whilst Participant 2 underlined that creating gamified activities is more difficult than standard lesson planning. Participant 3 identified limited time and resources as key limitations.

This theme suggests that, whereas DG provide significant educational benefits, they also impose higher pedagogical expectations on teachers and require thoughtful, intentional instructional design. Teacher needs to select appropriate digital games and ensure that they are applied in a meaningful manner and congruent with learning goals, curricular standards and students' levels of ability. Teacher also needs to consider possible problems such as differences in student engagement, digital competency, and the need to balance gameplay with instructional time. The integration of DG also involves teachers in developing appropriate evaluation systems that may capture both learning outcomes and involvement. Hence, the use of digital games makes instructional design more complicated and requires more pedagogical knowledge, creativity and time from educators.

2.2 Technical and Infrastructure Barriers

Technical issues appeared as a major worry for all involved. Teachers reported inconsistent internet connections, limited device access, and software concerns.

Participant 2 noted that not all students have equal access to technology, and Participant 3 highlighted that technological disruptions can disrupt the flow of instruction. These problems demonstrate that the efficiency of DG is heavily reliant on dependable technological infrastructures.

2.3 Student-Related and Classroom Management Challenges

Teachers also noted issues with student conduct, emotional responses, and classroom control. Some kids became too competitive, while others felt stressed or disengaged.

Participant 1 stated that some students feel pressured by competitive elements, whereas Participant 2 stated that students may emphasize scores over learning material. Participant 3 underlined the importance of clear instructions and active monitoring to keep attention.

This issue highlights the difficulty of matching pedagogical aims with engaging activities in the administration of gamified classrooms, where meaningful learning needs to be combined with active participation. Teachers are required to develop game-like experiences to help engage students' interest, but they also have a responsibility to ensure that these experiences are consistent with curricular goals and result in verifiable learning results. This brings up issues of keeping students engaged, making the most use of time, and ensuring that the learning experience is not lost in the fun of playing games. Moreover, teachers are confronted with challenges such as differing levels of student engagement, varied levels of digital literacy, and the need for proper evaluation methods that may reflect not only participation but also learning performance. Therefore, setting up a gamified classroom involves meticulous organization, instructional adaptability, and a discerning ability to merge enjoyment with substantive educational worth.

This can be explained by Self-Determination Theory. This study adds numerous theoretical perspectives to the literature on digital gamification in EFL situations. First, the findings contribute to Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by demonstrating how gamification features operationalize the psychological requirements of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in

real classroom situations. While previous research has mostly looked at these constructs numerically, this study gives qualitative evidence of how teachers perceive these motivating processes to emerge through elements like feedback, repetition, and peer interaction.

This finding not only aligns with Self-Determination Theory but also extends it by showing how this study contributes to gamification theory by proving that gamification's effectiveness is context-dependent rather than intrinsic. The findings imply that gamification's success is dependent on how its components—such as points, competition, and feedback—are pedagogically structured and controlled. This builds on current frameworks by highlighting the relevance of instructional design and classroom dynamics, rather than viewing gamification as a uniformly effective technique.

Third, the study adds to Teacher Cognition Theory by emphasizing the significance of instructors' attitudes and practical judgment in facilitating the application of digital gamification. The findings reveal that teachers do not passively absorb technology; rather, they actively adapt, analyse, and occasionally resist it in response to classroom reality, workload, and student requirements. This demonstrates the significance of teacher agency in technology integration.

Finally, the study improves the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) by giving a more nuanced view of technology uptake in educational settings. While TAM stresses perceived usefulness and ease of use, this study demonstrates that extrinsic factors—such as infrastructure limits, time constraints, and classroom management challenges—have a substantial impact on instructors' acceptance and continued use of digital gamification.

Overall, this research contributes to a more integrated theoretical perspective by connecting motivation, instructional design,

teacher cognition, and technological acceptability, providing a holistic framework for understanding digital gamification in language acquisition.

CONCLUSION

Regarding the findings and discussion of this study, it can be summarized that the explored teacher perspectives on the use of digital gamification (DG) in vocabulary learning in EFL courses have some conclusions. The data show that teachers view DG as a helpful instructional strategy that improves vocabulary retention and student motivation through interactive and engaging learning experiences.

This study explored teacher perspectives on the use of digital gamification (DG) in vocabulary learning in EFL courses. The data show that teachers view DG as a helpful instructional strategy that improves vocabulary retention and student motivation through interactive and engaging learning experiences.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the literature by combining ideas from motivation theory, gamification frameworks, teacher cognition, and technological acceptability, emphasizing the intricate interplay between pedagogical innovation and classroom reality. Pedagogically, the data indicate that successful DG integration necessitates not only engaging technologies but also enough institutional support, teacher education, and infrastructure.

However, this study has a variety of limitations. The small number of participants restricts the findings' generalizability, and relying on self-reported data may not capture all classroom practices. Future study should involve larger samples, classroom observations, and mixed-method to provide a more complete picture of DG implementation.

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