COMPETITIVE GAMIFICATION AND AFFECTIVE FILTER: UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

GAMIFICACIÓN COMPETITIVA Y FILTRO AFECTIVO: PERCEPCIÓN DE ESTUDIANTES UNIVERSITARIOS EN EL APRENDIZAJE DEL INGLÉS COMO LENGUA EXTRANJERA

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of digital competitive games on the perception and motivation of university students in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. Using a quantitative descriptive approach, a

survey was administered to 147 students at the State University of Southern Manabí (UNESUM). The methodology included a preliminary pilot phase consisting of four sessions using competition-type platforms; in this case, Educaplay and Blooke were used, during which participant observation revealed high levels of engagement and a significant reduction in performance anxiety. Results indicate a highly positive perception (M=4.52), with "Active Participation" (M=4.65) being the highest-rated dimension. It is concluded that the competitive nature and interactive versatility of this type of application or platform effectively lower the affective filter, fostering a more effective learning environment in higher education. This study is part of the research project " Fortalecimiento del nivel didáctico-pedagógico de los docentes en las instituciones educativas del cantón Jipijapa" and contributes to the University-Community Linkage project "Tareas dirigidas y apoyo psicopedagógico para fortalecer el aprendizaje de los alumnos en la Educación Básica Pública de Jipijapa, Fase III – 2025".

Keywords: gamification; EFL; student perception; digital competitive games; motivation; higher education

Resumen

Este estudio explora el impacto de los juegos competitivos digitales en la percepción y la motivación de los estudiantes universitarios en el aula de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL). Utilizando un enfoque descriptivo cuantitativo, se realizó una encuesta a 147 estudiantes de la Universidad Estatal del Sur de Manabí (UNESUM). La metodología incluyó una fase piloto preliminar que consistió en cuatro sesiones con plataformas tipo competencia, en este particular caso se usaron Educaplay y Blooket, en las que la observación de los participantes reveló altos niveles de compromiso y una reducción significativa de la ansiedad por el rendimiento. Los resultados indican una percepción muy positiva (M=4,52), siendo la "participación activa" (M=4,65) la dimensión mejor valorada. Se concluye que la naturaleza competitiva y versatilidad interactiva de este tipo de aplicaciones o plataformas reducen eficazmente el filtro afectivo, lo que fomenta un entorno de aprendizaje más eficaz en la educación superior. Este trabajo forma parte del proyecto de investigación "Fortalecimiento del nivel didáctico-pedagógico de los docentes en las instituciones educativas del cantón Jipijapa" y del proyecto de vinculación "Tareas dirigidas y apoyo psicopedagógico para fortalecer el aprendizaje de los alumnos en la Educación Básica Pública de Jipijapa, Fase III – 2025".

Palabras clave: *gamificación; EFL; percepción de los estudiantes; juegos competitivos digitales; motivación; educación superior*

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Introduction

In the field of higher education, teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) faces the constant challenge of overcoming psychological barriers that hinder learning. According to Yeh and Lan (2020), gamification is not only an entertainment tool but also a pedagogical strategy capable of significantly reducing language anxiety. In the Ecuadorian context, Rincón et al. (2025) argue that the integration of interactive platforms in virtual and face-to-face environments enhances active participation, transforming the traditional classroom dynamic.

Specifically, tools such as Educaplay enable a smooth transition to autonomous learning. As (Tumbaco et al. (2025) and Rincón et al. 2025) point out, the use of this platform in EFL teaching makes it easier for students to interact with the language playfully, improving vocabulary retention. However, the impact of competitive gamification, where students not only interact with the content but also compete with their peers, requires an in-depth analysis of how it affects the Affective Filter, especially in early-level students who tend to show greater resistance to oral expression.

Despite the availability of technological tools, there remains a gap in how these tools specifically influence the perception of higher education students in regional contexts such as Manabí. Do competitive games really motivate more than traditional classes, or are they just a momentary distraction? This study used two key platforms for its execution:

- Educaplay: Known for its ability to enhance vocabulary retention through interaction and immediate feedback (Denden & Belkhir, 2021).
- Blooket: An emerging platform that integrates elements of extrinsic gamification (points and rewards), which, according to previous studies (Tran, 2022), improves active participation and reduces classroom monotony.

The main objective of this research is to analyze UNESUM students' perceptions of the use of digital competitive games and determine how these influence their motivation and active participation during English language learning. This study is part of the research project " Fortalecimiento del nivel didáctico-pedagógico de los docentes en las instituciones educativas del cantón Jipijapa" and contributes to the University-Community Linkage project "Tareas dirigidas y apoyo psicopedagógico para fortalecer el aprendizaje de los alumnos en la Educación Básica Pública de Jipijapa, Fase III – 2025".

Materials and methods

A mixed methods research approach was used with a concurrent triangulation design. This approach allows the quantitative data obtained from the survey to be contrasted with the qualitative findings derived from participant observation and open-ended responses, providing a holistic view of the phenomenon of affective filtering and gamification (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

Population and Sample

The research was conducted at the State University of Southern Manabí (UNESUM). The population consisted of five beginner-level English courses, with an average of 28 to 35 students per course. The final convenience sample consisted of 147 students who completed the data collection instrument (approximate

response rate of 85%). The demographic profile is predominantly female (70.1%) and young (predominantly aged 18-22).

Instruments

- Perception Questionnaire: A 5-point Likert-type instrument validated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient (alpha = 0.958), indicating excellent reliability. The questionnaire assessed dimensions of motivation, participation, grammar, and anxiety.
- Open-ended question: Included at the end of the questionnaire to capture suggestions and subjective perceptions.
- Observation Journal: Used by the teacher-researcher to record nonverbal behaviors (emotional reactions, laughter, social interaction) during intervention sessions.

Intervention procedure

The pedagogical intervention was carried out over four face-to-face sessions for each of the five courses. Students used their own mobile devices (Bring Your Own Device - BYOD strategy) to participate in activities designed for two platforms:

- Educaplay: Aimed at reinforcing vocabulary and structures through memory and association activities.
- Blooket: Used to encourage playful competition, strategic decision-making (use of "powers" and rewards), and intensive grammar practice.

Data analysis

- Quantitative Component: A descriptive analysis (means and standard deviations) was performed using the Python programming language (Pandas and Matplotlib libraries).
- Qualitative Component: A thematic content analysis was applied to the open-ended responses and observation notes, categorizing the information into areas such as "Error Management," "Classroom Climate," and "Inclusion of Introverted Students."

Results and discussion

Quantitative Results: Student Perception

Figure 1 illustrates the characterization of the sample according to the participants' English proficiency levels. Most students are at the Basic level (76.9%), followed by the Intermediate level (20.4%), and a small minority at the Advanced level (2.7%). This distribution is highly representative of the regional university context, where introductory courses typically account for the largest student population. The fact that the study predominantly focuses on beginner levels adds significant value to the findings, as these are the stages where the Affective Filter is generally highest and where competitive gamification has proven to be a critical tool for breaking initial student passivity.

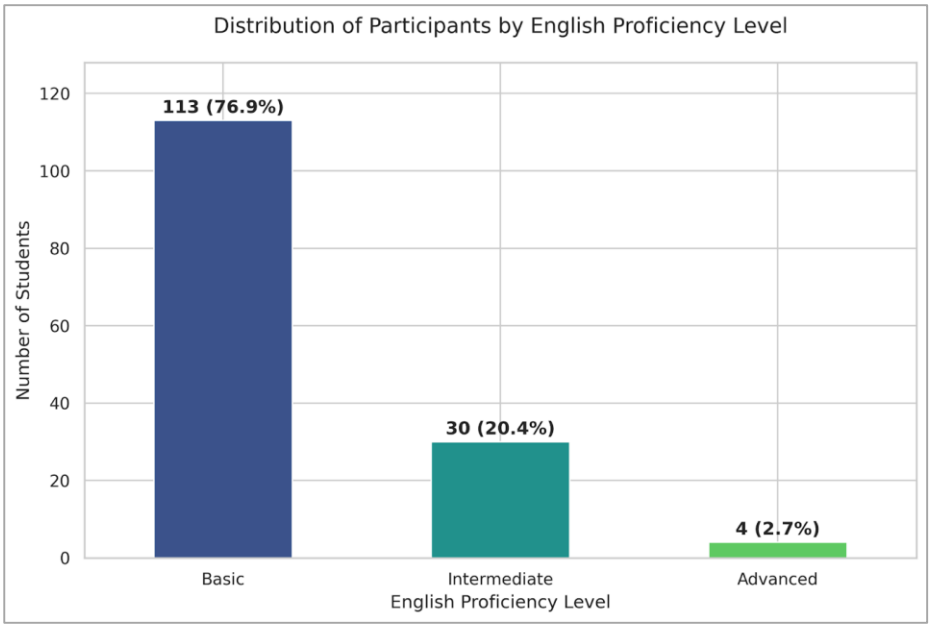

Figure 1. Level distribution

Statistical analysis reveals a highly positive assessment in all dimensions evaluated. The dimension with the highest score was Active Participation *(X = 4.65)*, followed by Grammar Practice *(X = 4.55)* and Motivation *(X = 4.52)*.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of students' perception dimensions regarding gamification (n = 147)

Dimension	Mean (X^{-})	Standard Deviation (σ)
Active Participation	4.65	0.84
Grammar Practice	4.55	0.87
Motivation	4.52	0.96
Anxiety Reduction	4.44	0.92

These data suggest that students not only enjoy the games but also perceive a direct benefit to their language skills.

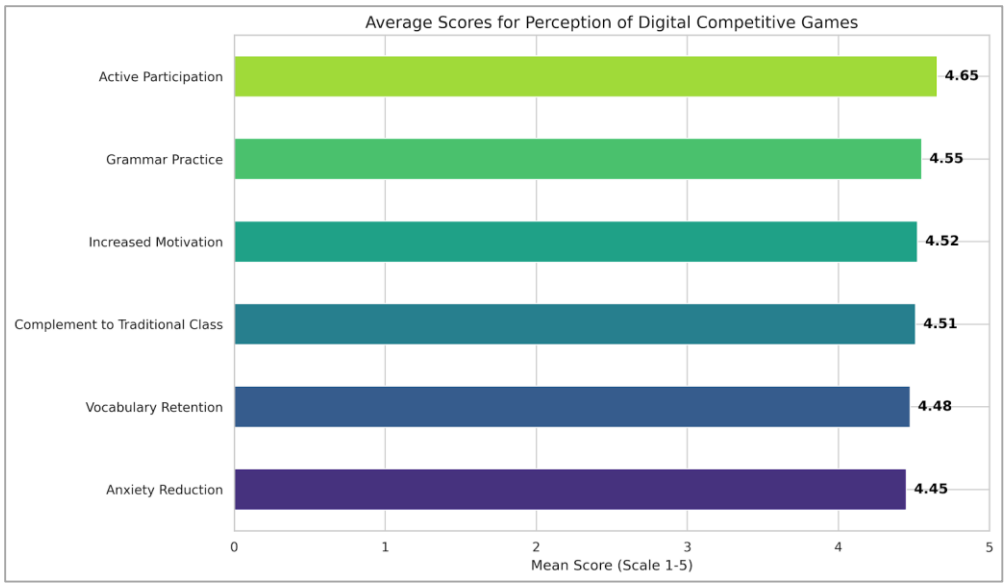

Figure 2. Average scores for perception of digital competitive games.

The analysis of the mean scores per dimension (Figure 2) reveals that the most significant impact of digital games is found in Active Participation *(M = 4.65)*, followed by Grammar Practice *(M = 4.55)*. These quantitative results corroborate the qualitative observations made during the sessions, where an atmosphere of 'positive noise' and constant interaction was recorded. The fact that anxiety reduction also obtained a high score *(M = 4.45)* reinforces the idea that these tools do not only teach content but also create a psychologically safe environment essential for foreign language learning.

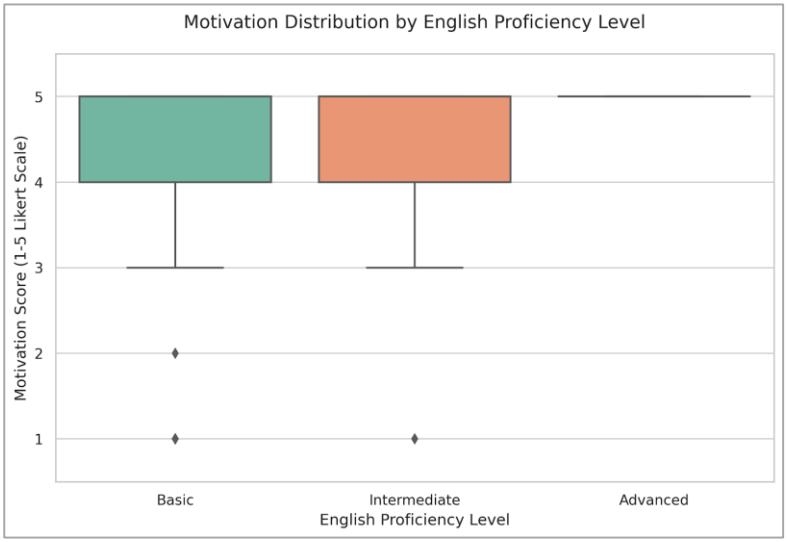

Figure 3. Motivation distribution by English proficiency level.

As illustrated in the boxplot (Figure 3), student motivation toward digital competitive games remains consistently high across all proficiency levels. Notably, in the Basic level group *(n=113)*, which is

traditionally more susceptible to language anxiety, the median motivation score reached the maximum value *(5.0)*. This suggests that digital gamification acts as a motivational equalizer, enabling students with lower language proficiency to engage at the same high level as those in advanced groups *(M=5.0)*. The minimal variance observed across groups confirms that the competitive nature of platforms like Blooket and Educaplay provides a universally appealing learning environment.

Qualitative Results: Observation and Student Voices

Through participant observation in the five courses and analysis of the open-ended responses, three emerging categories were identified:

- Transformation of the Classroom Environment: There was a dramatic shift from a traditional passive environment to a dynamic one with "positive noise." The use of Blooket mechanics (such as sending "powers") encouraged interaction similar to "playing with friends," breaking down the rigid teacher-student hierarchy.
- Resilience to Error: Unlike lectures, where mistakes often cause inhibition, in the gamified environment, mistakes were met with laughter and persistence. There were no signs of frustration, indicating a decrease in affective filtering.
- Inclusion of Introverted Students: A critical finding was the participation of traditionally reserved students. The nature of the game allowed students who rarely participated in class to not only participate but also lead the rankings, demonstrating that gamification offers a psychologically safe space for self-expression.

Discussion

The results of this study show a convergence between quantitative perception and the reality observed in the classroom. The high rating in the Active Participation dimension *(X = 4.65)* coincides with the findings of Stewart (2022), who states that platforms such as Blooket generate a "new wave" of student engagement thanks to their immediate reward mechanisms.

During the intervention sessions, it was observed that "positive noise" and laughter in response to mistakes validated the theory of affective filter reduction. This finding is in line with the action research of Solórzano et al. (2025), which emphasizes that innovative methodologies and the use of digital teaching aids break down student passivity. By comparing our data with that of Denden and Belkhir (2021) and Rincón et al. (2025), we confirm that students perceive Educaplay's versatility for vocabulary reinforcement as an effective support that complements traditional teaching, eliminating the frustration that often accompanies rote memorization methods.

The inclusion of traditionally reserved students in competitive dynamics supports Tran's (2022) thesis on how gamification democratizes learning in college, providing a psychologically safe environment where mistakes are perceived as part of the game and not as academic failure.

The convergence of quantitative and qualitative data confirms that competitive gamification acts as a catalyst for learning. The high score for active participation (4.65) is explained by field observations, where previously passive students took on leading roles. This phenomenon coincides with Flow Theory (Csikszentmihalyi), where the student is so immersed in the activity that the fear of external judgment disappears. Laughter in the

face of error confirms that Krashen's 'Affective Filter' is minimized, allowing language acquisition to occur naturally and without the anxiety that typically characterizes foreign language learning in college.

Pedagogical implications and limitations of the study

Despite the mostly positive perception, qualitative analysis of student suggestions identified critical areas that must be considered to optimize the implementation of gamification in higher education:

1. Balance between Competition and Cognitive Processing: It was identified that time pressure, characteristic of platforms such as Blooket, can cause stress in students with slower learning rhythms. Therefore, teachers are advised to balance "speed" games with "reflection" activities (such as those offered by Educaplay), ensuring that competition does not penalize deep cognitive processing. Prieto Andreu (2020) argues that the use of points and rankings (PBL) should be balanced to avoid "superficial gamification" and encourage a meaningful connection with the content.
2. Need for Phonetic Reinforcement: Participants pointed out the importance of including audio and pronunciation features within games. This implies that gamification in EFL should not be limited to visual grammar, but should evolve towards tools that integrate voice recognition and phonetic models for comprehensive communicative competence. This requirement to evolve toward tools with voice recognition and phonetic models is supported by the theory of visual grammar and digital constructivism applied to foreign languages (EFL). (Xiao, 2025) Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2010)
3. Differentiation and Leveling: A relevant finding was the demand for content adapted to individual academic levels. This suggests that game design should consider each student's zone of proximal development, preventing the activity from being perceived as too simple or excessively complex, which could lead to boredom or demotivation. Relating the demand for content adapted to individual academic levels to avoid boredom or frustration is a key finding in the literature on gamified instructional design. (Jaramillo-Mediavilla et al., 2024)
4. Curricular Sustainability: Students' desire for "more continuous" use indicates that gamification is most effective when it is permanently integrated into the curriculum rather than used as an isolated activity. The main limitation lies in the technological infrastructure and the need for ongoing teacher training in new platforms to avoid repetition fatigue. This could be related to the work of Pegalajar-Palomino & Martínez-Valdivia (2024), which indicates that permanent integration into the curriculum and the risks of saturation due to the abuse of playful mechanics are critical issues for the long-term viability of these strategies.

Conclusions

This study conclusively demonstrates that competitive gamification, implemented through platforms such as Blooket and Educaplay, has a transformative impact on the perception and affective performance of university students studying English. Based on data triangulation, the following conclusions are drawn:

Pedagogical and Motivational Effectiveness: Quantitative results confirm exceptionally high acceptance of these tools, with an average score of 4.52/5 for motivation. Students perceive that the playful dynamics not

only make the class more enjoyable but also facilitate the assimilation of complex grammar and vocabulary content, surpassing traditional teaching methods based solely on repetition.

Reduction of Affective Filter: Qualitative evidence and high scores on the anxiety reduction scale (4.44/5) reveal that the competitive digital environment displaces the fear of error. The "playing with friends" atmosphere recorded in the observations allows learning to take place in a relaxed and enjoyable state, where laughter replaces frustration, enabling more natural and effective language acquisition.

Democratization of Participation: It is concluded that gamification is a tool for pedagogical inclusion. By providing a psychologically safe environment, the use of competitive games encouraged the active participation of traditionally reserved students, who even topped the performance rankings. This suggests that digital strategies can break down the barriers of introversion that often hinder progress in the early stages of English learning.

Implications for University Teaching: The research highlights the need to integrate gamification in a planned and consistent manner. While the technological component is vital (BYOD strategy), it is the role of the teacher as a mediator that ensures that "positive" noise translates into meaningful learning. It is recommended that higher education institutions encourage the use of these tools to modernize the curriculum and respond to the profiles of today's students.

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