

## **Dixie Dixit: New Trends with Technology Gamification: What, Why, and How (Part 2)**

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In a previous column, I discussed the term gamification. I mentioned that it can be defined as the application of game-like elements to non-gaming contexts (Deterding et al., 2011) but it goes beyond just including games in a class. I also mentioned how gamification is being used in different types of courses and at different levels. In this second column, I will explore the application of gamification specifically in the language classroom.

So far, there is little literature on the use of gamification for language learning, although the language classroom seems ideally suited to it. Gamification in education is still relatively new and the pioneers tend to work in other disciplines. One exception, however, is Lee Sheldon (Plenda, 2014) who had extensive experience working as a television scriptwriter before moving to teaching. He has used his writing experience to develop complex stories where participants play roles and learn basic Mandarin as a language.

Abrams and Walsh (2014) have carried out studies on adolescents' vocabulary learning through online gamified tools. Specifically, they looked at a free online platform which uses gamified structures to help users increase their vocabulary ([www.vocabulary.com](http://www.vocabulary.com)). The site teaches and tests vocabulary in context, via multiple choice options in example sentences or in longer reading passages. It offers tips on how to look up words, and definitions and pronunciation help, quizzes and challenges. It can be accessed via computers or mobile devices. It was not developed especially for second language learners, but it is a great site and can be very useful.

Abrams and Walsh (2014) conducted two studies: one included using the above mentioned site ([www.vocabulary.com](http://www.vocabulary.com)) in the context of extracurricular tutoring and the other study incorporated the site into a literature course. Levels of engagement among the participants varied, but most showed an important increase in vocabulary knowledge, not just in word recognition, but in use as well.

A third example of gamification in the language classroom took place in my university, and I will provide the details. Two teachers participated in a *Massive Online Open Course* (MOOC) on the subject of gamification, and were interested in applying the concepts to their classes. They received permission to do so. They used the intensive summer course to pilot their ideas, and then started to document their activities and students' reactions and progress. Five groups of students participated in the course which was at a level equivalent to B2 on the Common European Framework scale. There was an average of 16 students in each group (81 students in all). The course ran for sixteen weeks, from May to November of 2014. The premise of the course was that students were working for a firm called *Creative, Inc.* which provides creative solutions to business problems. The students did not use a coursebook and there was no focus on

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grammar. Students were given problems and asked to work in teams to provide solutions. They were awarded points for punctuality, speaking only English, the most creative solutions, etc.

The following are examples of some of the activities used. Students were given envelopes containing sticky notes, paper clips, pipe cleaners, and rubber bands and were asked to create with these something “not useless”. Another example is that students were asked to invent a timepiece (watch or clock) which could tell time, but without hands or numbers. A different example is when students were shown a picture of me, taken abroad. They were told that I had lost my memory and their job was to discover where I was (the photograph held clues) and to get me home. They were given some constraints (I suffer from motion sickness and cannot travel for long periods of time, or by bus. I have a dog with me and must bring home the dog. I do not have a US visa, etc.) to make the task more difficult. Still another example is when students were asked to identify one important problem at the university, and to propose solutions to that problem.

An interesting point is that midterm and final exams were collaborative as well. Students had to work in teams to answer them. Grades were based on points obtained during the course, through the different activities.

At the end of the semester, students were asked to take a TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) exam. This is a standardized exam which measures listening and reading ability; grammar is measured within reading activities. The scores range from 10 to 990 points. Taking the test was voluntary, but we wanted an external measure of students’ progress. We did not offer the students any special preparation for the exam. Fifty-six students took the test. The average score was 794 and 25 students got scores over 850 (equivalent to C1 level). We did not apply the exam at the beginning of the course, so we cannot offer a comparison. We can say however, that eliminating the focus on grammar from the courses did not seem to make a difference. We also believe that focusing on listening, reading and speaking activities helped the students get strong scores.

Not all students liked the gamified version of the course. Some preferred more structure, others worried about the lack of grammar and others felt uncomfortable without a book. The great majority, however, enjoyed the course very much. They liked the element of fun and surprise, never knowing what they were going to do next, and using the language for practical purposes.

These are three examples of gamification in the language classroom. Two of them—Sheldon (Plenda, 2104 ) and my own experience—are totally gamified, whereas Abrams and Walsh (2014) present gamification in only one aspect which is vocabulary.

I realize that not everyone has the freedom or the interest in offering a totally gamified course to their students. Hopefully these examples have helped the readers to understand gamification and I suggest that the readers can also check out the articles. In the following issue, I will offer options for including gamified elements in a traditional language class.

**References**

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