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Using Educational “Gamification” to Increase Motivation and Participation in Secondary Level English Language Learners

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Background

- Clinical teacher in the language center at Arlington Heights High School
- 9th grade English Language Learners (ELLs)
- Beginning to intermediate limited English proficiency (LEP)
- Preparing for **STAAR** (State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness) by using district-provided Countdown materials

Key

- **L2** – Second Language
- **SE** – Self Efficacy
- **EM/IM** – Extrinsic/Intrinsic Motivation
- **TEKS** – Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills



Literacy Review

Many secondary level ELLs are challenged to *simultaneously* acquire L2, content knowledge, and adapt to social and cultural changes. When acquiring L2, students’ **attitude** and the classroom **environment** play key roles in fostering motivation and supporting learning. Therefore, educators must be able to:

- **Support** these students’ self-efficacy
- **Develop** students’ intrinsic motivation
- **Respond** to individual needs
- **Provide** a safe, culturally responsive environment.

One strategy that implements creative, student-centered, and collaborative instructional strategies is “**gamification**.” This strategy aims to increase overall participation, IM, and SE by incorporating game elements (scoreboards, tokens) in non-game contexts. Gamification impacts student attitude about acquiring L2 by creating a **collaborative** atmosphere that promotes teamwork, healthy competition, and fun. When ELLs feel supported by their teachers and peers, their SE and IM increases and they are more likely to ask questions, participate, and actively engage in the learning process.

When participating in gamification pedagogy, students should expect *reinforcements* (EM) similar to a game:

- Rewards, advancing levels, leaders, and winning
- These game elements are also helpful in outlining positive academic and social behaviors (rules and expectations) that support a productive learning environment.

Research Question

Can games support the development of ELL’s intrinsic motivation to participate (reading out loud, asking questions, discussing) in class?

Strategy Implemented

Implementing gamification, increasing EM using tokens (stickers), and promoting collaboration in a group setting. Teams of students will earn tokens based on:

- Productive group discussions**
- Staying on task**
- Winning class-wide games**

The team with the most tokens will exchange their tokens for donuts on 3/29.

Individual students can earn individual tokens (different from group tokens) to exchange for 2 extra credit points each for:

- Promoting teamwork**
- Staying on task**

Tokens can be exchanged for extra credit on 3/29.

Developing IM

- Ensure** that students have the necessary knowledge and skills to complete the task
- Present** a general topic that appeals to ELL’s interests
- Maintain** ELL’s interest and behavior using reinforcement (EM)
- Create** different opportunities for ELLs to interact with information and practice skills
- Apply** new knowledge and skills to new, authentic situations and settings

Teacher Schemata

Students’ interests, linguistic abilities, and student schemata

Rationale for Strategy

My English I SOL class consists of 9th grade students from beginning to intermediate LEP. For some students, January 2016 was their first time in a mainstream English classroom. The countries represented include:

- **Mozambique, Honduras, Iraq, China, Rwanda, West Africa, Congo, Mexico, and Philippines**

Despite the diverse population of languages and English levels, these students are held to the same state standards as their native-English speaking peers and are expected to master specific TEKS in the STAAR end-of-course (EOC) assessments before graduating.

Although English I SOL students’ STAAR scores are normally *exempt* from ELLs graduation requirements, ELLs are still required to master certain skills to move into English II SOL. Exposing these students to the STAAR promotes familiarity with the EOC exam because they are required to **pass the English II STAAR** their sophomore year.

Many students feel unmotivated to perform well academically or on the STAAR because many do not recognize the impact of one exam on their future. Many of my students feel that they are “**going to fail**” or that they “**don’t need English**,” so their motivation levels are low. Many students prefer playing games or chatting on their phones than reviewing STAAR material.

In order to gain students’ interest, I hoped that adding a sense of competition to the classroom would spark students’ interest enough to participate. Gamifying the district-supplied materials would make learning and reviewing the TEKS more interactive, fun, and productive. Using **tactical** EMs (stickers and donuts) would increase productive behaviors and encourage students’ oral contributions in a small group setting. These tokens provide **immediate reinforcement** for behaviors, and this immediacy will keep the students engaged in the activities.

Finally, since many of our ELLs come from cultures (Hispanic and African) that value **community** and team work, implementing a team-centered approach promotes collaborative learning and student-teacher communication. Promoting team work aims to create a **safe** environment where students feel comfortable enough to **take risks, debate answers, and learn from one another**. This classroom atmosphere makes learning a product of team effort, where everyone is expected to contribute.

Student Schemata

Student expectations for group work, game rules, and basic content knowledge (English I TEKS)

Discussion

Gamifying STAAR review for my 9th grade ELLs resulted in increased student’s verbal participation, IM, and SE. There was an increased frequency of **student initiated questions, student led collaboration** and **self-regulation** among groups, and **use of L2** in large group discussions. Students sharing a common L1 assisted each other in learning content knowledge and acquiring L2 skills. A notable difference was in students on-task behavior, peer support systems, and motivation to oral read.

Increasing the peer and teacher support created a safe and healthy competitive classroom environment to support a **wholesome approach** to learning and students’ self-inquiry. Two of my students showed significant growth in their SE; they went from **unmotivated and disruptive** to **leading their team** and asking questions about material. Notable class-wide improvements were higher grades and more academic discussions.

Future implications for myself as an English educator is the importance of making content accessible to all students in an interesting way. Gamification pedagogy requires significant planning, structure, and creativity on the teacher’s part, but the outcome is a **productive, student-centered** learning experience. Giving students the autonomy to make decisions, pursue interests, and ask questions individually and as a team creates students who are, despite any skill deficits, intrinsically motivated and eager to participate and learn.



Resources

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