



A playful, gamified teaching approach for teaching English in rural primary schools

Propuesta pedagógica lúdica-gamificada para la enseñanza del inglés en educación básica primaria rural

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the research was to develop and validate a pedagogical proposal based on playful and gamification strategies to strengthen the English communication skills of primary school students in multigrade rural institutions in the municipalities of Jordán and Villanueva, Santander department, Colombia. A qualitative approach was adopted through participatory action research, with a sample of 96 students and five teachers, using semi-structured interviews, participant observation and collaborative workshops with triangulation of techniques and informants. The implementation of playful-gamified activities increased students' motivation, participation, and communicative confidence, with verifiable progress in vocabulary, pronunciation, and comprehension of basic instructions, both in schools with and without technological access. It is concluded that play and gamification are viable and adaptable pedagogical strategies in rural contexts with limited resources, provided that the design explicitly links the challenges to the linguistic objectives.

Descriptors: language teaching; social pedagogy; rural education. (Source: UNESCO Thesaurus).

RESUMEN

La investigación tuvo como objetivo desarrollar y validar una propuesta pedagógica basada en estrategias lúdicas y de gamificación para fortalecer las habilidades comunicativas en inglés de estudiantes de educación básica primaria en instituciones rurales multigrado de los municipios de Jordán y Villanueva, departamento de Santander, Colombia. Se adoptó el enfoque cualitativo mediante investigación-acción participativa, con una muestra de 96 estudiantes y cinco docentes, aplicando entrevistas semiestructuradas, observación participante y talleres colaborativos con triangulación de técnicas e informantes. La implementación de actividades lúdico-gamificadas incrementó la motivación, la participación y la seguridad comunicativa de los estudiantes, con avances verificables en vocabulario, pronunciación y comprensión de instrucciones básicas, tanto en sedes con acceso tecnológico como sin él. Se concluye que la lúdica y la gamificación son estrategias pedagógicas viables y adaptables en contextos rurales con recursos limitados, siempre que el diseño vincule explícitamente los retos con los objetivos lingüísticos.

Descriptorios: enseñanza de idiomas; pedagogía social; educación rural. (Fuente: Tesoro UNESCO).

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Research articles section



INTRODUCTION

Learning English as a foreign language is becoming increasingly important in contemporary education systems, as proficiency in this language broadens access to scientific information, advanced training programmes and more competitive work environments in an increasingly interconnected global context. However, in many rural areas of Colombia, such as the municipalities of Jordán and Villanueva in the department of Santander, English language teaching faces structural obstacles that are beyond the control of educational stakeholders: poor infrastructure, lack of contextualised teaching materials, low teaching hours and insufficient training of teachers in foreign language teaching methodologies.

According to the results of the Saber 11 tests, published by the Colombian Institute for the Evaluation of Education, there has been a sustained decline in the average score for English at the national level. In the second semester of 2023, this average fell to 48.9 points compared to 72.9 in the first semester of the same year, highlighting structural weaknesses in the teaching of this language, which are more acute in rural areas where English is not part of the student's immediate sociocultural environment (Ramírez and Agudelo, 2022). In the department of Santander, 62% of students are at levels A- and A1 of proficiency, a figure that reveals a significant gap compared to the national average (ICFES, 2023).

Against this backdrop, play and gamification emerge as pedagogical strategies with the capacity to transform the classroom into a motivating, participatory space that can be adapted to the diversity of rhythms and levels typical of multigrade classrooms. Play, understood as a set of recreational activities with pedagogical intent, promotes social interaction, meaningful learning and the comprehensive education of students (Espín et al., 2023), while gamification introduces elements typical of game design points, levels, challenges and rewards—into educational contexts, with the aim of increasing learner motivation and engagement (Deterding et al., 2011; Kapp, 2012).

International academic literature documents positive results from these methodologies in English language teaching (Jaramillo et al., 2024; Vergara et al., 2021; Villasante, 2024); however, most experiences have been developed in urban contexts with technological availability, which creates a gap in their application in rural multigrade schools with limited resources, a gap that this research seeks to address. The main purpose was to develop and validate a pedagogical proposal based on play and gamification to strengthen English language learning in primary education in the municipalities of Jordán and Villanueva, ensuring its viability in contexts with limited technological resources and diverse levels of competence in the classroom.

The relevance of the proposal is based on four considerations: the first refers to the need to rethink English teaching practices in rural contexts where approaches focused on memorisation and decontextualised grammar persist (Negrete et al., 2024); the second refers to the importance of designing strategies that recognise the sociocultural diversity of rural students and make creative use of available resources; the third refers to the potential of play and gamification to create low-anxiety environments that favour language acquisition, in line with the affective filter hypothesis proposed by Krashen (1982); and the fourth points to the need to strengthen the professional development of rural teachers through pedagogical tools that can be adapted to their actual working conditions.

Consequently, the research objective is to develop and validate a pedagogical proposal based on playful and gamification strategies to strengthen the English communication skills of primary school students in multigrade rural institutions in the municipalities of Jordán and Villanueva, department of Santander, Colombia.

METHOD

The research was based on the pragmatic paradigm, oriented towards the resolution of practical problems from experience and situated action (Morgan, 2014); In line with this epistemological position, a qualitative approach was adopted using the participatory action research (PAR) method, which allowed the educational phenomenon to be addressed through joint reflection between the researcher and the actors involved, teachers and students, in a cyclical process of



observation, planning, action, reflection and restructuring (Hernández et al., 2014). As pointed out by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), action research is particularly relevant when the object of study is linked to the transformation of practices situated in specific contexts.

The choice of this method responded to the nature of the problem: teaching English in a rural multigrade primary school is a complex phenomenon that cannot be resolved from an external perspective, which is why PAR allowed for the construction, together with the teachers, a contextualised action plan that included playful and gamified strategies, adjusted based on the information collected in each cycle, which facilitated the articulation between the diagnosis of existing pedagogical conditions and the transformation of classroom practices through a situated proposal.

Setting and participants

The study was conducted in two neighbouring municipalities in the department of Santander, Colombia: Jordán Sube, with seven educational centres belonging to the Nuestra Señora de Fátima School (114 primary school students), and Villanueva, with fourteen campuses belonging to the Eliseo Pinilla Rueda School (196 students and 16 teachers), institutions that share common characteristics such as multi-grade teaching, limited internet connectivity, a lack of specialised teaching materials in English and low teacher training in foreign languages, making up a total population of 310 students.

The sample was determined using a statistical formula for estimating proportions, with a confidence level of 90% and a margin of error of 7%, which yielded a sample of 96 students. The selection of key informant teachers was done intentionally, prioritising the relevance of the information over statistical representativeness, as recommended in the specialised literature on qualitative research (Hernández et al., 2014). Five primary school teachers who taught English at the selected schools participated; a subsample of 15 students was also formed for the second interview to evaluate the results.

Techniques and instruments

Three main data collection techniques were used: the semi-structured interview, applied twice before the intervention to gather the initial perceptions of teachers and students about play and gamification, and at the end of the proposal to assess the perceived changes in communication skills; participant observation, recorded in field diaries, which allowed for the documentation of teacher-student interactions, the use of resources, and the development of playful-gamified activities in the classroom; and collaborative workshops with teachers, which encouraged collective reflection, joint activity design, and continuous validation of research progress.

In order to ensure the validity and reliability of the data, triangulation of techniques and informants was carried out, so that classroom observations were contrasted with interviews with teachers and students, and both sources were linked to the field diary records. Data analysis followed the thematic analysis procedure, using open and axial coding of transcripts, identifying emerging categories and constructing relationships between them.

Intervention procedure

The pedagogical proposal was implemented in three phases corresponding to the IAP cycles: in the diagnostic phase, the conditions for teaching English at the participating sites were characterised, the prior conceptions of teachers and students about play and gamification were identified, and the resources available at each site were mapped. In the design and implementation phase, playful-gamified activities were collectively constructed, adapted to the physical resources available (vocabulary cards, bingo, role-playing games, quizzes, collaborative stories), dispensing with technology in locations without connectivity, while in locations with internet access, the proposal was complemented with platforms such as Kahoot and Quizizz. During the evaluation phase, information was collected on changes in motivation, participation and communication skills, and adjustments were made to the activities based on the data obtained.

The research was conducted under strict ethical considerations: informed consent was obtained from participants and their families, confidentiality of information was ensured through the use of



codes (D1-D5 for teachers; E39-E59 for students), and the principles of beneficence, autonomy and non-maleficence were respected in the design and implementation of the proposal.

RESULTS

Characterisation of previous conceptions and practices

Analysis of the initial interviews revealed a fragmented understanding of playfulness and gamification among the participating teachers; some teachers defined playfulness exclusively as the incorporation of informal games into the classroom, without linking it to a structured pedagogical intent, while others offered a broader understanding. Thus, D1 stated that 'playfulness is simply when students start playing, such as with card games or vocabulary bingo,' while D3 pointed out that 'playfulness is an educational strategy that involves students actively and thus helps them learn in a fun way,' a variability that highlights the need for training processes that clarify the pedagogical basis of both strategies.

With regard to gamification, D2 associated it exclusively with digital tools such as Kahoot, while D4 reduced it to a reward system disconnected from the learning structure, stating that 'for me, gamification is giving points or rewards to students for answering correctly'; Only D5 offered a vision closer to the theoretical concept, stating that 'gamification is a model that goes beyond games, where learning is a challenge,' which contrasts with the explicit recognition of D4, who admitted to not knowing these strategies, thus evidencing the lack of training in innovative methodologies that characterises many teachers in rural areas with multi-skilled profiles.

The students, for their part, showed an initial positive attitude towards playful activities: as E39 put it, 'yes, because it's fun and we learn at the same time', a position that E40 reinforced by pointing out that the dynamics 'help me remember English words'; However, some students expressed doubts about the effectiveness of games for sustained learning. E42 commented that games are fun, but that sometimes they do not help them learn words correctly, which anticipated one of the central challenges of implementation: articulating motivation and lasting learning.

Design and implementation of the proposal

Based on the diagnosis, a pedagogical proposal was designed, organised into two complementary axes: recreational activities and gamified activities. The former included vocabulary lotteries and bingo (estimated duration: 30 minutes, weekly frequency), role-playing and dramatisations (40 minutes, biweekly frequency) and collaborative stories (35 minutes, biweekly frequency). The gamified components included point systems, medals, and levels to track student progress, question-and-answer competitions (25 minutes, biweekly), and, at locations with internet connectivity, interactive grammar quizzes using Kahoot (20 minutes, monthly).

A central feature of the proposal was its design for contexts without technological resources: most of the activities were carried out with low-cost materials such as word cards, cardboard tokens, posters made by the teachers and students themselves, and playground activities, a decision that responded to the reality of several locations where the lack of connectivity had been identified as a recurring obstacle to methodological innovation (Del Carmen et al., 2024), while at locations with internet access, digital versions complemented the physical ones without replacing them.

The methodology adopted was constructivist and student-centred: the activities promoted cooperative learning through group games, team competitions and role-playing, which created spaces where students with greater proficiency supported those with greater difficulties, putting into practice the concept of the zone of proximal development formulated by Vygotsky (1978). The assessment was formative in nature, supported by rubrics with indicators of participation, vocabulary use, oral expression, grammatical comprehension, and group collaboration.

Results of implementation: motivation and participation

The implementation of the proposal visibly changed the dynamics of the classes: teachers reported a significant increase in the frequency of student participation, especially among those



who were shy or had previously shown little interest in English. D1 pointed out that ‘fun activities in class are essential for motivating students, especially the shy ones, who feel more comfortable participating in games.’ competitive dynamics with symbolic prizes sustained enthusiasm during the sessions and led to more frequent use of English in the classroom.

Reward systems had a positive effect on student involvement: as E44 said, ‘I like it when we earn points and get a prize at the end,’ while E49 noted that he ‘likes to compete and see who knows more’; However, some students pointed out that sometimes the focus on prizes shifted attention away from actual learning. E51 commented that sometimes he only concentrated on the prizes, not on learning, which highlights the tension between extrinsic motivation and intrinsic learning already noted in the specialised literature on gamification (Prieto, 2024).

The flexibility of the activities was decisive for implementation in multigrade contexts: teachers adapted the levels of complexity of the tasks according to the different grades present in the classroom, establishing heterogeneous groups that favoured peer support, a strategy that is consistent with the principles of cooperative learning systematised by Johnson and Johnson (1999) and allowed all students, regardless of their previous level of English, to find a place in the playful and gamified activities.

Results in communication skills

The second semi-structured interview conducted with the subsample of 15 students, together with classroom observations and field diaries, identified progress in communicative competence: participants reported feeling more confident speaking English in the context of games and group activities, acknowledged a greater understanding of simple instructions given in the language, and reported a broader vocabulary related to their school and everyday environment. As E56 said, ‘they help me remember English words and pronounce them better,’ which shows a positive effect on lexical memory and phonological awareness.

However, difficulties persisted in understanding fast speech and constructing longer, more fluent sentences; some students requested more conversation activities, short dialogues, slow repetitions, and exercises focused on pronunciation, which shows that the proposal favoured the construction of an initial communicative base, but that continuity in oral expression and listening comprehension practices is still required. In this regard, and in line with Richards' (2015) approach, the design of activities that integrate linguistic content with real communicative situations remains the central challenge of English language teaching in rural contexts.

Barriers and conditions for sustainability

The implementation faced barriers of various kinds: resistance to change was noticeable among some veteran teachers who were initially sceptical about the pedagogical impact of playful and gamified activities; however, upon observing the changes in their students' motivation and participation, most gradually adopted the new methodologies. Time management was another recurring challenge, as playful and gamified activities require preparation and execution time that sometimes reduced the space available for other curricular content, although teachers agreed that the time invested was offset by greater student involvement.

The lack of technological resources in several rural locations prevented the use of digital activities such as Kahoot or Quizizz in all contexts, a limitation that led teachers to prioritise physical versions of the activities, confirming that gamification does not depend exclusively on technology, but on teacher creativity and clarity in learning objectives (Prieto, 2024). The students themselves emphasised this possibility, with E59 commenting that technology is good, but that sometimes time is wasted playing, suggesting that the pedagogical value lies not in the device but in the design of the activity.

DISCUSSION

The results of this research are in line with theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence of recognised soundness in the specialist literature: the increase in motivation and participation observed during implementation is consistent with Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory, which describes an optimal state of engagement when the level of challenge matches the learner's abilities (Vergara et al., 2021). Hence, gamified activities, by organising content into progressive



levels and challenges, generated this state in a significant proportion of students, particularly in group competition activities and scoring systems.

Gamification without technology implemented in rural locations with limited resources is consistent with the findings of Álvarez et al. (2022), who argue that gamified experiences supported by physical materials can be just as effective as digital ones when the pedagogical design is solid. This finding has direct implications for rural education policy, as it suggests that the technology gap should not be an insurmountable obstacle to methodological innovation. Along the same lines, Fuentes et al. (2024) point out that the key lies in contextualising strategies to the particularities of the locations, the multi-grade organisation and the available resources.

The cooperative work generated in team games can be interpreted in the light of cooperative learning as formulated by Johnson and Johnson (1999), who highlight positive interdependence and shared responsibility as conditions for the group to promote the learning of each member. In the classroom scenes recorded, group games allowed students with greater mastery to support those who had more doubts, in line with the notion of the zone of proximal development proposed by Vygotsky (1978) and with socio-constructivist proposals that conceive knowledge as the result of guided interaction.

The progress in initial communication skills is consistent with Krashen's (1982) comprehensible input hypothesis, which posits that frequent exposure to the language in low-anxiety environments promotes both comprehension and oral production. The playful activities generated precisely these conditions, as students reported feeling more confident speaking English in the context of the game than in formal assessment situations. Persistent difficulties in fluency and long-term lexical retention are, in any case, consistent with Yáñez's (2023) warnings about the need for systematic and repeated listening and oral production practices that go beyond occasional games.

The initial resistance of teachers and their subsequent openness upon observing the positive effects on students is part of the debate on teacher training in innovative methodologies. In this regard, Bernate (2021) argues that the pedagogical proposal constitutes a space for reflection in practice where the teacher intertwines discipline, context and pedagogy, and the results of this research confirm that this reflective process requires support, time and concrete evidence of impact for changes in practices to be sustainable. The experience also reinforces the arguments of Izquierdo et al. (2021) that teaching English in rural contexts requires strategies that integrate local knowledge and the particularities of the environment, something that play facilitates due to its dynamic, situated and socially mediated nature.

The tension between extrinsic motivation and intrinsic learning identified in this research echoes a debate present in the literature on gamification: when rewards are not linked to tasks that are meaningful for learning, motivation tends to focus on the prize rather than on the skill developed (Prieto, 2024). This suggests that the design of gamified activities should explicitly link challenges to linguistic objectives, so that students perceive the relationship between participating, advancing in the game, and improving their command of English, an articulation that constituted one of the most relevant adjustments that teachers made during the IAP cycles.

CONCLUSION

The research achieved its main objective by developing and validating a pedagogical proposal based on playful and gamification strategies that strengthened the English communication skills of primary school students in rural multigrade institutions in Jordán and Villanueva, Santander. Its implementation in three cyclical phases diagnosis, design and intervention, and evaluation demonstrated that activities such as vocabulary lotteries, role-playing games, collaborative stories, and point and reward systems visibly increased students' motivation, active participation, and communicative confidence, even in locations without access to technology, where low-cost physical materials proved equally effective. Teachers, initially sceptical, gradually validated the proposal when they saw its effects in the classroom, and students reported progress in vocabulary, pronunciation and comprehension of simple instructions in English, confirming the pedagogical and contextual viability of integrating play and gamification



as situated, adaptable and sustainable strategies for teaching English in rural environments with limited resources.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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