GAMIFICATION IN EFL SPEAKING CLASSES (9TH GRADERS)

Dawletbaeva Biybiraba Narbaevna
Nukus state pedagogical institute
Faculty of Philology
3-rd year student
dawletbaevabiybiraba@gmail.com
Sharapova Aysuliw Nizamatdinovna
Nukus state pedagogical institute
Faculty of Philology
3-rd year student
aysuliwsharapova@gmail.com

Introduction. Ask any 9th grader to stand up and speak English in front of the class, and the room often goes quiet not because students do not know the language, but because they are afraid. Fear of making mistakes, fear of being judged, and a growing awareness of social image at adolescence all combine to make speaking the most underused of the four language skills in secondary school EFL classrooms. Meanwhile, the same students who freeze at a speaking task will spend hours engaging with video games, competing in online challenges, and earning digital rewards without any hesitation.

This contrast raises a compelling pedagogical question: if adolescents are so naturally drawn to game-like environments, why are EFL classrooms still largely structured around passive, anxiety-provoking formats? Gamification broadly understood as the use of game design elements such as points, levels, badges, leaderboards, and narrative challenges in non-game contexts has emerged as a promising answer to this question (Deterding et al., 2011). While gamification has been applied across various disciplines, its specific potential for developing EFL speaking skills at the secondary level deserves closer attention. This paper focuses on 9th graders as a particularly important cohort. At this age, students are cognitively capable of complex communicative tasks but are simultaneously at peak social anxiety, making motivation and emotional safety critical variables in language learning. The central argument of this paper is that gamification, when implemented purposefully, does not merely entertain it fundamentally restructures the emotional and motivational landscape of speaking practice.

Theoretical background. Gamification: beyond points and prizes**.** Gamification is often misunderstood as simply adding a point system to a lesson. Deterding et al. (2011) offer a more precise definition: gamification is "the use of game

design elements in non-game contexts," a definition that distinguishes it from full-scale game-based learning. What makes gamification pedagogically meaningful is not the reward itself but the psychological shift it creates. Kapp (2012) argues that gamification leverages the same motivational architecture that makes games compelling clear goals, immediate feedback, manageable challenge levels, and a sense of personal agency.

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, as discussed in Reeve, 2012) provides a robust theoretical framework for understanding why this works. The theory identifies three core psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Gamification, when designed well, addresses all three: students choose how to engage (autonomy), receive feedback that shows progress (competence), and compete or collaborate with peers (relatedness). For language learners, having these needs met during a speaking task can significantly lower the affective filter — Krashen's term for the emotional barrier that blocks language acquisition when anxiety is high.

Speaking anxiety in adolescent efl learners**.** Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) is well-documented in the literature. Horwitz et al. (1986) identified FLA as a distinct, complex psychological construct particularly linked to speaking performance. Among adolescents, this anxiety is compounded by heightened self-consciousness and fear of negative evaluation from peers. The secondary school EFL classroom, with its traditional focus on accuracy and public performance, can therefore become a place that discourages rather than develops oral communication. Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) offer a more nuanced picture, showing that enjoyment and anxiety can coexist in language classrooms. When enjoyment is high, anxiety loses much of its debilitating power. This finding is significant: it suggests that the goal of EFL pedagogy should not be to eliminate challenge but to surround challenge with enough positive emotional experience to keep learners engaged. This is precisely the emotional territory that well-designed gamification seeks to occupy.

Gamification and language learning**.** Research on gamification in education more broadly has produced encouraging results. Hamari et al. (2014), in a systematic review of empirical studies, found that gamification generally has positive effects on user motivation and engagement, though they cautioned that context and design quality matter enormously. In language learning specifically, Subhash and Cudney (2018) reviewed gamified learning environments in higher education and found consistent improvements in engagement, persistence, and self-reported motivation. While much of this research focuses on higher education, the underlying motivational mechanisms are arguably even more relevant at secondary school level, where intrinsic motivation is often fragile. Plass et al. (2015) emphasize that game-based approaches work not because they are fun in a trivial sense, but because they create conditions for deep

engagement what Csikszentmihalyi described as "flow": a state of complete immersion in a challenging but manageable task. For EFL speaking, achieving flow means a student is focused on communicating meaning rather than monitoring every grammatical form, which is precisely the condition under which fluency develops.

Gamification strategies for efl speaking classes. Role-play missions and narrative tasks One of the most effective gamification strategies for speaking is the use of narrative missions. Rather than asking students to "practice a dialogue," the teacher frames the speaking task as a mission: "You are a journalist at a press conference. Your job is to ask three critical questions before the timer runs out." This narrative framing does several things simultaneously: it provides a communicative purpose, it reduces personal embarrassment (the student is "in character"), and it creates a sense of stakes without real-world consequences.

For 9th graders, who are developmentally drawn to identity exploration, role-play missions offer an additional benefit: they allow students to speak as someone else, which is a well-documented strategy for reducing speaking anxiety (Dörnyei, 2001). The character becomes a linguistic shield.

Point systems and progress tracking**.** Visible progress is a powerful motivator. When students can see their speaking points accumulate over time awarded for participation, fluency attempts, vocabulary use, or peer interaction they develop a sense of growth that is independent of formal assessment. Importantly, point systems should reward effort and risk-taking, not just accuracy. A student who attempts a complex sentence and partially succeeds should earn more points than one who plays it safe with short, correct answers.

Digital tools such as Kahoot!, Quizlet Live, and Classcraft allow teachers to implement point systems without bureaucratic overhead. Classcraft, in particular, allows students to build speaking "characters" that gain abilities as their language skills develop a mechanic that deeply resonates with 9th-grade gamers.

Team challenges and collaborative speaking tasks**.** Leaderboards that rank individuals can be counterproductive when students are already anxious about performance. Team-based challenges offer a better balance: students speak to contribute to their group, not to perform for the teacher. Mayer (2019) notes that collaborative game environments tend to produce higher-order thinking and more sustained engagement than competitive individual formats. In an EFL context, team speaking challenges debates structured as tournaments, storytelling relays, or information-gap races produce natural communicative pressure without isolating any individual student.

Badges and incremental mastery**.** Badges tied to specific speaking milestones (e.g., "First to speak without reading notes," "Used three new vocabulary items in

conversation," "Led a group discussion") provide granular recognition that traditional grading cannot. Zichermann and Cunningham (2011) describe the motivational power of incremental achievement systems: each small badge represents a completed challenge and points toward the next one, creating a continuous cycle of engagement. For EFL teachers, designing a badge system around speaking competencies also serves a formative assessment function — it makes learning objectives visible and student-owned.

Pedagogical implications and recommendations. Several practical principles emerge from the literature and classroom application: Design for process, not performance. Gamification elements should reward the act of speaking attempting, experimenting, collaborating rather than the correctness of output. This shifts the classroom culture from one of evaluation to one of practice.

Use competition carefully. Individual leaderboards can demotivate lower-achieving students. Team-based competition or personal-best tracking ("Did you beat your own score?") tends to be more inclusive and more motivating for a diverse 9th-grade classroom. Keep the feedback loop tight. One of the reasons games are engaging is that feedback is immediate. EFL teachers using gamification should provide rapid, specific feedback not just on accuracy, but on communicative success. Balance novelty with routine. Gamification works partly because it is different. If every lesson is a gamified competition, novelty fades. The most effective implementations use gamification strategically as the engine for specific speaking practice cycles while maintaining other pedagogical structures around it. Align game mechanics with learning goals. A speaking badge earned for reading aloud is pedagogically hollow. The game mechanic must be tightly aligned with the targeted skill: spontaneous speech production, interactive negotiation of meaning, or extended discourse.

Conclusion. The reluctance of 9th-grade EFL learners to speak English is not primarily a linguistic problem it is a motivational and emotional one. Gamification offers a research-supported set of tools for reshaping the speaking classroom into a space where adolescents feel challenged but safe, competitive but collaborative, and rewarded for the very act of opening their mouths in a foreign language. This does not require expensive technology or a complete curriculum overhaul. It requires thoughtful design: a point system here, a mission brief there, a team challenge that gives every student a role. The literature consistently shows that when emotional conditions are right, language comes. Gamification helps create those conditions. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies of gamification in secondary EFL contexts, particularly in Central Asian educational settings where student reticence in speaking tasks is especially pronounced. The 9th-grade classroom, caught between the

playfulness of childhood and the pressures of academic assessment, may be exactly where gamification can do its most important work.

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