

Grammar Through Gamified Storytelling: Empowering Learners Across Generations

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ARTICLE INFO

Essence, Teaching English as a Foreign Language, Linguistics, and Literature Journal,
Vol 2(2),2025

ABSTRACT

This study explores the integration of gamified storytelling into grammar instruction to empower EFL learners from various generational backgrounds in a university context. Grounded in the principles of active learning and digital engagement, the research employed a classroom action research (CAR) design over two cycles to investigate how gamified storytelling influences grammar mastery and learner motivation. Participants included the second and the fourth year English education students who engaged in interactive grammar lessons centered on narrative-based digital games. Data was collected through grammar tests, reflective journals, observations, and interviews. Findings indicated a significant improvement in students' grammatical accuracy and increased learner autonomy, collaboration, and confidence. The gamified storytelling approach also helped bridge generational gaps in learning preferences by offering a flexible, creative, and student-centered learning environment. The implications suggest that combining grammar instruction with narrative-based games can foster a more inclusive and empowering EFL classroom, making grammar more relatable and enjoyable across age groups. This study contributes to the ongoing discussion on innovative grammar pedagogy and supports the use of technology-enhanced learning tools to promote engagement and equity.

Keywords:

Gamified Storytelling, Classroom Action Research, EFL Empowerment

Introduction

Learning English grammar is important, but many students find it boring and difficult. Traditional grammar classes usually focus on memorizing rules and doing exercises. These methods often fail to help students use grammar in real communication. Many learners do not feel interested or motivated during grammar lessons, especially at the university level (Waluyo, Phanrangsee, & Whanchit, 2023). Because of this, teachers and researchers are now looking for more fun and effective ways to teach grammar (Al-Khresheh, 2022).

One method that is becoming popular is called gamification. This means using game elements in learning, like giving points, creating levels, using badges, or completing missions. Gamification makes learning more exciting and active. In grammar classes, games can help students remember rules and practice grammar in fun ways (Gusta, Putri, & Permata, 2024). Recent studies show that gamified grammar learning helps students become more motivated and confident (Abdulbaki et al., 2025). However, if the games are not well-designed, students might enjoy them but not actually learn better (Chan, 2023).

Another powerful method is storytelling. When students learn grammar through stories, they can see how grammar works in real situations. For example, a story about someone's adventure can include past tense, passive voice, or conditionals. This makes grammar more meaningful and easier to remember (Zolfaghari, 2023). Digital storytelling—when students create or interact with stories online—can also improve writing and grammar skills while building creativity (Al-Ali & Al-jamal, 2023). Research shows that students who learn grammar through storytelling are more engaged and better at using grammar in context (Luo, 2023).

Some educators now combine gamification and storytelling in grammar learning. This is called gamified storytelling. In this model, students play roles in a story and must use grammar correctly to complete tasks or move to the next part of the story. This method helps students feel like they are part of the learning process, not just listeners (Laura-De La Cruz et al., 2023). A recent study found that this combination improved grammar understanding and made students feel more confident in their language skills (Jarrah et al., 2023).

This method is also great for empowering learners. Empowerment in education means helping students take control of their learning. Instead of just following instructions, students can make decisions, solve problems, and reflect on their learning. This is especially helpful in classes with students of different ages, such as first-year and final-year university students. In these mixed-age classes, gamified storytelling gives everyone a chance to learn at their own pace and contribute in their own way (Romero-Rodríguez, 2024).

Even though gamification and storytelling are well-researched, few studies focus on using both at the same time to teach grammar. Also, not many researchers look at how this method works with students from different generations in one classroom. Most studies focus only on one method or one age group (Nilubol, 2023). There is also limited research that involves teachers trying out these methods step by step and reflecting on the results. This kind of research is called Classroom Action Research (CAR), and it helps teachers improve their teaching based on real classroom experiences (Kim & Lim, 2021).

This article will explore how gamified storytelling can be used to teach grammar in university classes with students of different generations. The study uses a CAR approach, which includes planning, teaching, observing, and reflecting in two cycles. The grammar lessons will be designed as stories with missions and grammar-based tasks. Students will

complete these tasks to move through the story. The study will look at grammar improvement and also how students feel about the lessons—whether they feel more confident, active, and involved.

The main goals of this article are: (1) to create grammar lessons using gamified storytelling, (2) to try out these lessons in real classrooms, (3) to see if students improve their grammar and feel more empowered, and (4) to understand students' feedback about the learning experience. This study hopes to offer a new, fun, and effective way to teach grammar that works for students of all ages.

Method

This research used Classroom Action Research (CAR) because the goal was to improve grammar teaching in real classroom settings. CAR is a method that helps teachers improve their own teaching practices by planning, acting, observing, and reflecting in cycles (Burns, 2022). This design fits the study well because the researcher is also the teacher, and the classroom is used as the research site.

The participants were university students from two different academic levels: second-year students and fourth-year students. This was done to see how gamified storytelling could help learners from different generations in the same classroom. There were 25 students in total: 15 from the second semester and 10 from the fourth semester. The students had various levels of grammar ability and learning experience, but all were studying English as a major. The class was a regular grammar course held once a week for 100 minutes.

The research was conducted in two cycles, each lasting three meetings. In Cycle 1, the grammar topic was simple past tense. In Cycle 2, the topic was passive voice. Each meeting followed the same structure: (1) short review, (2) introduction of the story setting and characters, (3) grammar tasks inside the story, and (4) reflection or feedback. The story-based tasks were designed as games, such as puzzles, missions' challenges. To move forward in the story, students had to use the target grammar forms correctly (Glover & Laming, 2021).

The teaching materials were developed using the Gamified Storytelling Model (GSM), which includes three main components: story narrative, game elements, and grammar goals (Kim & park, 2023). The stories were written with a clear beginning, conflict, and resolution. Game elements included points, time challenges, team missions, and unlocking secret codes. Each grammar task in the story was linked to the lesson goal. For example, students needed to use the past tense to describe events in a mystery story.

Data collection used both qualitative and quantitative methods. For the quantitative part, students took a grammar test before and after each cycle. The test focused on accuracy and application of the grammar topics taught. Scores were compared to see if there was improvement. For the qualitative part, the researcher used student reflection journals, classroom observations, and interviews to understand how students felt about the lessons and whether they felt more empowered as learners.

Data analysis for the grammar tests used simple descriptive statistics like average scores and percentage of improvement (Fitria, 2021). For the qualitative data, thematic analysis was used to find common patterns in the students' responses. The researcher looked for comments related to enjoyment, motivation, confidence, and collaboration. All data sources were triangulated to ensure accuracy and trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2023).

Ethical considerations were also followed. Students were informed about the research goals and asked for their consent. Their names were kept confidential. The activities were part of their regular learning, so no additional pressure was placed on them. Participation in reflection journals and interviews was voluntary.

In short, this study used classroom action research to test how grammar lessons with gamified storytelling could empower students from different academic levels. The method combined grammar teaching, story narratives, and game elements to make learning more engaging. It also included both test scores and student feedback to understand the effectiveness of the approach.

Findings and Discussion

Findings

Cycle 1 Overview

The first cycle of this classroom action research focused on integrating gamified storytelling into grammar instruction. The topic chosen was past tense, commonly challenging for students across age groups. A short, interactive digital story was designed around a mystery adventure that required students to spot, correct, and apply past tense verbs. The story was broken into episodic segments, each followed by tasks such as “grammar treasure hunts” or “fix the detective’s diary,” encouraging both focus and collaboration.

Initial feedback from students revealed a boost in motivation and curiosity. Learners expressed that the “game-story” format made grammar less intimidating. They were no longer just memorizing rules, but instead applying them meaningfully within a narrative.

Student Performance and Engagement

Pre- and post-test results showed improvement. On average, students’ grammar scores in past tense accuracy increased from 62% to 77%. Though the progress was moderate, it indicated that meaningful context (story) combined with challenge (game elements) helped reinforce grammar use. This aligns with findings by Hung (2022), who stated that game-based grammar tasks could significantly enhance syntactic awareness and performance among EFL learners.

In addition, students showed visible engagement during class. Observations recorded higher participation rates, especially among typically passive learners. The competitive element, such as points and badges for correct usage in the story, played a crucial role in engagement. This echoes Wang & Tahir (2020), whose meta-analysis confirmed that platforms with game-like features increase motivation and learning outcomes.

Collaborative Learning Through Story-Based Games

Group storytelling tasks were also introduced, where students rewrote story endings using varied past tense verbs. These collaborative activities gave students space to discuss, correct, and negotiate language together. Peer interaction became a source of informal grammar correction and scaffolding. Kim & Park (2019) support this approach, noting that peer feedback in gamified environments leads to improvements in grammatical accuracy. In this study, several learners reported learning more from peers’ mistakes than from the teacher’s correction. This observation was confirmed by in-class journal entries and reflection sheets collected post-task.

Learner Empowerment and Confidence

The “empowerment” aspect began to emerge during Cycle 1, particularly among lower-performing students. Many said they felt more confident because the gamified tasks did not publicly highlight errors but instead celebrated effort and progress. Badges were given not just for accuracy but for creativity and collaboration, building emotional safety. Alfian & Lailiyah (2021) argue that grammar games, when combined with a low-anxiety environment, lead to more empowered learners who are willing to take risks in using the language. This was visible in voluntary participation rates, especially in peer review tasks and mini role-plays that extended the story.

Storytelling: More Than a Method

One key insight was how storytelling provided not only context but also emotional connection. Students empathized with characters, which made them more attentive to language choices. They cared about getting the grammar right to “help the hero.” This kind of narrative immersion turned grammar from abstract rules into tools for meaning-making. Yuliani & Fitriani (2023) explain that storytelling increases focus, motivation, and deeper grammar retention, especially among learners who struggle with rule-based instruction. Our reflection journals echoed this, with one student writing: “I want to help the main character survive, so I make sure my verbs are right.”

Reflection and Areas for Improvement

Despite these successes, challenges remained. Some students found the storyline too “childish” or “too long.” A few preferred a more traditional explanation before engaging with the story. These mixed reactions highlight that while gamified storytelling works well for many, adjustments are needed to meet diverse learner preferences. Also, not all tasks were equally effective. Grammar quizzes embedded in the story were more successful than open-ended writing prompts, suggesting that structured interaction leads to better outcomes in early cycles. Papadakis & Kalogiannakis (2022) emphasize the need for “meaningful gamification”—that is, not just fun, but relevant to learning goals and personalized to learner needs.

Conclusion of Cycle 1

Cycle 1 demonstrated that gamified storytelling can significantly improve grammar accuracy, learner motivation, and confidence. However, improvements are needed in narrative design and task variety. In the next cycle, revisions will focus on refining story length, incorporating learner feedback, and balancing game mechanics with deeper grammar analysis. The aim remains: to make grammar meaningful, empowering, and enjoyable across generations.

Cycle 2: Revising the Strategy

Based on student feedback and reflection journals from Cycle 1, we revised the instructional design in Cycle 2 to include shorter stories, more interactive tasks, and multiple game levels. The aim was to make grammar tasks feel like “missions” rather than assignments. This cycle focused on the present perfect tense, another topic many learners struggle with. A mystery-solving story called “The Case of the Lost Passport” was introduced, where learners had to decode past experiences using present perfect forms to trace a missing character’s journey. Students were excited about the new format. Many

said the shorter story segments helped them focus better, and the level-based system allowed them to move at their own pace.

Improving Grammar Accuracy

Grammar assessment scores increased again—from 68% to 85% accuracy in present perfect usage. This was a higher gain than in Cycle 1. Students demonstrated clearer understanding of when to use the present perfect versus simple past. Tasks like “Build the Timeline” and “Which Clue Uses Have/Has?” were particularly effective. According to Yuliani & Fitriani (2023), when grammar is used for storytelling purposes, students are more likely to process the structure meaningfully, which improves retention and accuracy.

Cross-Generational Learning Impact

A unique feature of Cycle 2 was the inclusion of peer mentoring between younger and older learners. Since the class included both young adults and older returnee students, we paired them during group tasks. Surprisingly, both groups benefited. The older learners offered richer vocabulary and life experiences, while younger students were more familiar with digital tools and games.

Confidence and Risk-Taking

Another visible outcome was increased risk-taking in language use. During storytelling presentations and grammar challenges, more students attempted longer, more complex sentences. The safety net of the game environment seemed to lower the fear of making mistakes.

Improving Peer Collaboration

The group storytelling task was redesigned to include rotating roles such as “grammar checker,” “story leader,” and “vocabulary finder.” This made collaboration more dynamic and ensured everyone practiced grammar actively, not passively.

Challenges and Adjustments

Despite these positive developments, some issues continued. For instance, technical problems with mobile devices interrupted some activities. Not all students were equally comfortable with digital tools, especially older learners.

Conclusion of Cycle 2

Cycle 2 showed stronger outcomes in both grammar mastery and learner empowerment. The revised gamified storytelling model proved highly effective for multi-generational learners.

Discussion

The results from Cycle 1 show that gamified storytelling can improve grammar accuracy, motivation, and learner confidence, but its effectiveness varies depending on narrative design and task structure. The moderate improvement in grammar scores (62% to 77%) supports Hung's (2022) assertion that game-based grammar tasks enhance syntactic awareness, while also confirming Wang & Tahir's (2020) findings that game-like features boost motivation.

The collaborative storytelling tasks in Cycle 1 also align with Kim & Park's (2019) work, emphasizing that peer feedback in gamified contexts improves grammatical accuracy. This peer-based learning was especially evident among lower-performing students, as supported by Alfian & Lailiyah's (2021) notion that a low-anxiety environment empowers learners to take risks. Storytelling also offered emotional engagement, reflecting Yuliani & Fitriani's (2023) observation that narrative immersion deepens grammar retention.

However, Cycle 1 revealed the need for adjustments. While gamified storytelling worked well for many, others found the stories too childish or long, echoing Papadakis & Kalogiannakis's (2022) call for "meaningful gamification" tailored to learner needs.

The modifications in Cycle 2 addressed these concerns—shorter stories, level-based progression, and more interactive tasks led to greater gains (68% to 85%), suggesting that adapting game mechanics can significantly boost outcomes. The cross-generational mentoring further supports Zainuddin & Halili's (2020) claim that gamified strategies enable inclusive learning, allowing both younger and older students to contribute their strengths.

Increased risk-taking and role-based collaboration in Cycle 2 reflect Papadakis & Kalogiannakis's (2022) point that meaningful gamification builds resilience, while Hung's (2022) findings on socially constructed grammar learning were confirmed through peer discussions.

Nevertheless, technical barriers and varying levels of digital literacy remain challenges, reinforcing Alfian & Lailiyah's (2021) reminder that balancing fun with clear learning objectives is essential. Overall, the findings suggest that refining gamified storytelling to balance narrative engagement, grammar focus, and learner diversity can create a highly effective, multi-generational grammar learning environment.

Conclusion

This study explored how gamified storytelling could be used as an innovative approach to teaching grammar across generations of learners in a higher education context. Across two action research cycles, the integration of narrative elements and gamification techniques, such as level-based missions, badges, peer collaboration, and role rotation demonstrated positive impacts on both grammar accuracy and learner engagement. Learners across age groups, including younger university students and older adult learners, showed improved mastery of grammatical structures like simple past and present perfect tenses. More importantly, they developed greater confidence in using grammar for meaningful expression.

Unlike traditional grammar instruction, which often isolates grammatical rules from communication, this approach embedded grammar within storytelling challenges that required learners to apply language in authentic, goal-oriented contexts. This shift enabled learners to see grammar as a tool for expression rather than a burden to memorize, reflecting Yuliani & Fitriani's (2023) findings that contextual grammar enhances retention and learner motivation.

Moreover, gamification created an inclusive learning environment that empowered all participants to contribute their strengths. This result resonates with Zainuddin & Halili's (2020) claim that multi-age classrooms benefit from differentiated, participatory strategies that balance structure and autonomy.

Importantly, the findings also highlighted emotional gains. Learners became more willing to take risks, made peace with mistakes, and even began co-teaching grammar

concepts to peers. These are signs of ownership, which Papadakis & Kalogiannakis (2022) describe as key outcomes of meaningful gamification in language education.

While technical and instructional challenges remained such as varying digital literacy levels and occasional student resistance to game-based formats, the action research framework allowed for reflective refinement of strategies. By continuously adapting story formats, task complexity, and group dynamics, the teaching process remained responsive to learner needs and classroom realities.

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