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**GAMIFICATION TO FOSTER 11° GRADERS STUDENTS' ENGLISH TEST  
PREPARATION TOWARDS MEANINGFUL PROGRESSIONS OF THE L2  
LANGUAGE IN THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM**

By

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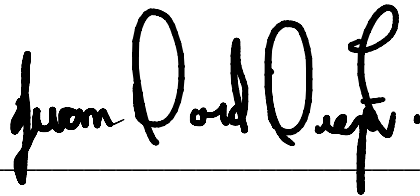
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A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Juan David Díez Trujillo", is written over a horizontal line. The signature is stylized and cursive.

JUAN DAVID DÍEZ TRUJILLO

## Abstract

This qualitative research sought to explore how gamification could be implemented as a strategy to foster better L2 test preparation processes at a private bilingual school in Medellín, Colombia via virtual lessons. Within this study, lays the importance of the gamification strategy in educational spaces, specially, virtual ones. Between 15 years to 17 years old teenagers participated in this study; the instruments to collect the data were participant-observation, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, learners' instruments and teacher's journal. The aim of this study was to comprehend how gamification could impact L2 test preparation processes for better practices in both, the English language and improving virtual environments settings.

The findings of this study confirmed that gamification fosters better L2 test preparation practices and, as well, it affects positively students' learning of English. Besides, it allows better teaching and learning practices in virtual scenarios. The study concluded that gamification, applied in virtual environments, provides teaching and learning key aspects in order to succeed within this strategy: challenge, better memory progressions, team work, competitiveness and engagement. As well, gamification learning principles and its elements and mechanics like rewards, scores, leaderboards proved to be valuable for the achieving better performances in L2 tests. This research is a referent for other educators interested in gamification and L2 virtual lessons. Future research could include public school settings or other test preparation fields.

**Key Words:** gamification, L2 test preparation, virtual spaces, meaningful English progressions.

*To my Mom and thesis adviser*

*When there is only darkness, we just need to see a light to guide our path. Continue lighting other paths, bringing the spark of life for those who seek it. I dedicate this work to the both of you, you transformed my world and brought me back to life when, more than ever, my life was hopeless. I hope God guides me through your wisdom so I can pass the light onto others thirsty of hope and in need. You taught me that life tastes better when you serve others.*

*God bless you always*

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I want to dedicate this message to my mom, it is in Spanish so she can read a small part of the many pages containing this thesis: Madre, hace veinte años me fui de la casa a vivir mi vida solo. Tuve mucho miedo al principio, solo en una habitación, pero siempre recordando las palabras que me brindaste en diciembre de 1996 cuando cursaba séptimo grado y perdí cuatro áreas, cuando todos me decían que me faltaba, que debía de ser mejor estudiante y persona: “Mijo, hágale que usted es capaz con eso y con muchas cosas por venir”. Recuperé las cuatro materias, pero más importante, hasta el día de hoy siempre me han acompañado esas palabras. Gracias Madre por siempre haber creído en mí y darme el mejor consejo que jamás me hayan dado.

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to students, for taking education as a tool to positively change this world and the students' lives.

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## **Chapter One**

### **Exploring the Potential of Gamification for L2 Progressions in Virtual Lessons**

#### **Statement of the Problem**

If the year 2020 has shown something to us is that education can change drastically from one moment to another, in this very case, COVID-19 resulted in all the schools closing for moving students into virtual lessons (Acevedo Rincón & Floréz Pabón, 2020; Carey 2020; Ruka, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2020). Suddenly, virtual lessons started to proliferate not only in Colombia but around the world facing new great challenges: cultural, economic, social and educational (Acevedo Rincón & Floréz Pabón, 2020). As consequence, towards March 12<sup>th</sup> of 2020, the Presidency of the Republic of Colombia issued Presidential Directive No. 02 (Presidency of the Republic, 2020), whose main proposal was centralized on the ICT tools use, which could minimize the impact of the current situation in the provision of all public services (Acevedo Rincón & Floréz Pabón, 2020).

As a consequence, in Colombia, since March 16<sup>th</sup> in 2020, all in-person classes were suspended and virtual education was an opportunity to continue with the pedagogical processes. However, many teachers did not have any experience and had to experiment in online classes since there was not an adaptation to virtual lessons but a mere adoption of learning strategies, methodologies and approaches from in-situ lessons to online lessons just intermediated by ICT (Carey, 2020; Ruka, 2020). According to Ruka (2020) and Acevedo & Floréz (2020), in Colombia, this drastic alteration in education made evident that teachers and many schools were not prepared for this mobilization yet. Besides, virtual education still needs more research, exploration and gain more experience so that it

becomes a meaningful learning and teaching environment (Acevedo Rincón & Floréz Pabón, 2020) and, in addition to the above-mentioned idea, there is still a lack of comprehension of the current generations and their learning processes.

This transition from in-person classes to virtual ones will not only take place because of the pandemic times, as well, as Yong, Nagles, Mejía, & Chaparro, C. (2017) pointed out, the changes in the Colombian virtual education will continue to happen also because of the constant and rising outbreak of the new ICT in many different settings such as the globalization of the economies, internationalization of the marketing, scientific and technological developments that have generated new learning and teaching challenges. One key component that could provide solutions to the technological, economic and cultural current challenges is the virtual education. Thus, exploring, analyzing and studying within the field of virtual lessons practices could be said that is thinking about how education could be transformed as peoples' realities as transformed as well.

Further, still appraising the new vicissitudes in education, learning and teaching English has become an important occurrence to be analyzed and understood so all teaching community can stop along the way, reflect and study upon this state of affairs in order to improve learning and teaching processes with more precise, humanistic and linguistic purposes attending the students' real needs. Analyzing the role of English in Colombia, the concept of its learning as a second/foreign language is a phenomenon that has been gaining importance in the last decades. Since the General Law of Education in the 1990s, the government has tried to promote English as a second language in Colombia (Usma, 2009; González, A 2010; Gómez Sará, 2017; Mora et al 2019). In addition to the prior idea, as English continues to gain force in the educational field in Colombia so the international English certification processes do.

Accordingly, on the one hand, education is facing new realities and claims surrounding virtual education in Colombia. And additionally, on the same hand, learning and teaching English towards certification processes must seek meaningful practices through virtual education. According to Kang Shin & Borup, (2020) virtual lessons can leave students feeling secluded and unsupported. In Colombia, this could be happening because of different factors such as: not knowing or not fully understanding the ICT the teachers and students use, the excessive number of activities being given to the students, and too much self-guided activities without a proper support and assessment (Ruka, 2020). Therefore, it could be inferred that most of the features of significant teaching practices are not being adapted into cyberspace, they are just merely being displaced from a physical space into a virtual one.

Furthermore, in relation to virtual environments, with the rapid progress of the internet and the new gaming companies arising, the digital gaming community grew so that nowadays there are more than 2.5 billion gamers worldwide. (Deloitte center for technology media & telecommunications, 2019; Gough, 2019). According to Vorhaus (2020), the growth of the gaming industry demand, within the pandemic times, has been of 53% compared to the last year, mostly, because people were seeking social and emotional support in virtual worlds due to the isolation. More and more people continue to join the gaming community and it is time for education to start finding new paths where, as Gee (2008) expressed, education marries emotion with education.

Acknowledging the previous stated situation, Kang Shin & Borup, (2020) propose ideas of how to encompass virtual lessons so students can feel engaged and learn through a meaningful way. These ideas deal with a proper students' support and feedback, suitable

assessment, providing an environment where the students' experiences play a main role, and the designing classes with proper structures and rhythm.

Keeping in mind the prior notions; English as a lingua franca to be learnt due to its rapid spread within many different cultural, social and virtual spaces (Mora and colleagues, 2016) and the necessity of fostering meaningful English learning and teaching practices through virtual lessons, and the growth of the gaming industry, the implementation of gamification inside the L2 virtual classroom may possibly offer an approach where students' experiences become ideal scenarios for significant learning of the second language (Gee, 2008) where students incorporate social, cultural and cognitive processes for having a better understanding of their realities (Mora, and colleagues, 2020) and be able to succeed in their new coming experiences in learning (Gee, 2008).

Hence, introducing the idea of applying gamification into the classroom, either in-person or in virtual lessons, in a current context where education demands transforms, English becomes fundamental to be mastered, English international certification processes continue to grow on demand and gamers proliferate in the classrooms every day more and more, will permit to, as Gee (2020) expressed, change old school paradigms where learners get involve into multiple worlds so they become producers and makers and not merely consumers (Mora, Gee, and colleagues 2020). Gamification strategies may allow adapt platforms and use tools in many areas of knowledge. It permits an innovate educational milieu, which might contribute with more participatory and active learning (Vargas-Macías, Rodríguez-Hernández, & Sánchez-Saenz, 2020).

Therefore, what is envisioned around this research is to comprehend how, through the implementation of the gamification, the virtual English classes could be fostered for

meaningful and critical mastering of the second language, and, moreover, permit to train students, in a meaningful way, for achieving international certifications within the same target language. This research is not about negatively disapproving the current teaching and learning virtual practices held by the teaching community of second/foreign languages and start hindering the learning processes. On the contrary, this is about proposing meaningful ideas useful for all the educational community, challenging overriding discourses (Mora, 2014), understand the complexities of institutional issues, take social action to change dynamics of injustice while allowing more social construction, and most important, fostering learning practices where, as Gee (2008) stated, learners marry emotion to cognition in challenging scenarios.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study explores ideas and notions as to how the application of gamification could foster students' English test preparation towards their *Cambridge* certification in the exam *B2 First*. This study provides insight and give ideas of how the implementation of these concepts may permit students to feel motivated and challenged towards an English test preparation through more engaging and meaningful L2 practices.

### **Research Question**

- To What Extent the Application of Gamification Can Foster Significant English Test Practices towards Meaningful Processes of the L2 Language in Virtual Spaces?

### **Defining My Study's Underpinning Concepts**

In this segment, I describe the concepts that helped me better comprehend my research on the application of gamification, through virtual lessons, to foster meaningful English learning and teaching practices towards preparing students for achieving the international certification with the *Cambridge* test *B2 First*. In order to frame this study



appropriately it was necessary to define the following key concepts from the literature read: gamification, gamification learning principles and elements, language learning and teaching, virtual environments and test preparation. At the end of this section, I will present the connection between gamification and English test preparation.

## **Gamification**

There are a number of different competing definitions for gamification but, for the current study, gamification could be understood as the use of game elements, game mechanics and game thinking in non-game contexts (Burke, 2014; Kapp, 2012; Vargas-Macías, Rodríguez-Hernández, & Sánchez-Saenz, 2020; Zichermann and Cunningham, 2011). Nevertheless, it becomes important to highlight that it is not just to make students entertained momentarily through games inside the classroom or about punching some badges on a website or platform (Burke, 2014; Eusse, 2017; Gee, 2008; Tenório, Reinaldo, de Góis, & Lopes, 2017). On the contrary, gamification pursues students to find similar challenges, commitment, team work, seen in games and video games into learning and teaching processes without diverting from the pedagogical goals (Gee, 2008; Tenório, Reinaldo, de Góis, & Lopes, 2017).

As James Gee (2008) and Burke (2014) stated, gamification is not about making activities look like games or merely providing rewards, instead, it is to empower the learner to reach their goals. Kapp (2012) defined gamification for learning as: *“the usage of game-based mechanics, aesthetics and game thinking to engage people, motivate action, promote learning and solve problems”* (Kapp, K 2012, page 10). This term does not imply to design games and take them into the classroom, moreover, gamification consists on using game elements, game mechanics and game thinking into non-game contexts (Gee, P 2008; Burke,

2014; Strmečki, Daniel & Bernik, Andrija & Radosevic, Danijel. 2015; Vargas-Macías, Rodríguez-Hernández, & Sánchez-Saenz, 2020).

To better comprehend how gamification takes place through the experience, Gee (2008) explains how people do not learn just from abstract symbols but through experiences; people store these experiences and run simulations with them within their minds. It is preparing people based on their own experiences and simulations, empowerment and in problem solving situations for achieving certain organized goals. Gee (2008) remarks that in order the experiences to be meaningful for the learner, they need to meet certain conditions.

According to Gee (2008), the principles experiences must meet for gamification to be assertive are: first of all, experiences must have structured and well-designed goals so they become meaningful for the learners. As well, experiences must be continuously interpreted and analyzed (in action and after action). Thirdly, Gee (2008) explains how providing immediate feedback permits learners to recognize and assess their errors so they can see where their expectations have failed. It is vital to encourage the learner to explain why and where the expectations were unsuccessful and what things they would have done differently. Fourth, there must be a wide range of opportunities for the learners to apply their previous experiences so they can correct and improve the interpretation of the practices. Additionally, learners need to learn from the others' interpreted and explained experiences.

Likewise, Gee (2008) emphasizes that mentoring in the classroom takes form through modeling, worked examples, and some forms of explicit instruction. Gee (2008) remarks that when experiences come across with the previously mentioned conditions, people organize them in a way where they can build simulations that allow them to prepare

for action. The simulations people run are accounts of interpreted experiences done to predict, act and assess. These learning principles will be explained one by one in this same chapter due to their importance and relationship with the current research.

With regards to the elements of gamification, Deterding et al. (2011) established five levels of game elements that must be embraced within the gamification elucidation: interface design patterns, game design patterns and mechanics, design principles and heuristics, game models and game design methods. The previously mentioned levels include several elements such as: badges, leaderboards, levels, avatars and many more. Nevertheless, the authors remark that not all the elements have to be used in learning, they go according to goals and mechanics surrounding the lesson and, as well, these elements tend to be used within already existing courses in order to provide a gamified experience. Therefore, in a quite rudimentary form, gamification can be the use of game elements in a targeted context (Mazo, 2020).

Nonetheless, it becomes important to clarify that upon hearing the term of gamification, people tend to mistake it with game-based learning. According to Al-Azawi, Al-Faliti, & Al-Blushi, (2016), authors of a comparative case study between gamification and game-based learning, they refer that game-based learning is used to encourage students to participate in learning while playing and adding fun to the learning process. Nuñez, Castellar, and Van Looy (2016) explained that there are two types of games inside the classroom: the ones shaped for specific educational purposes and the ones implemented just for bringing fun into the classroom. In game-based learning the game is the medium to which learning takes place, while, in gamification, only the aspects of the game are used in order to facilitate learning.

Equally important, Kapp (2012) defined gamification for learning as the usage of game-based mechanics, aesthetics and game thinking to engage people, motivate action, promote learning and solve problems (Enders, 2013; Eusse, 2017; Kapp, 2012). Nevertheless, as Strmečki, Bernik, and Danijel (2015) pointed out, there could be other components in gamification such as: narration, storytelling, technology and interactivity. Gamification seeks to connect motivational potential in order to influence behavior and it is the outcome of the success of the gaming industry, social media and decades of research in human psychology (Burke, 2014; Deterding, 2011; Gee, 2008; Kapp, 2012).

Kim, Song, Lockee & Burton (2018), in their book *Gamification in Learning and Education*, make three important clarifications to fully appreciate the exact meaning of gamification:

1. Gamification is a set of relevant activities and systematic processes not just a sole activity.
2. Gamification must have specific purposes or goals to solve problems.
3. Using game mechanics such as badges and points is not gamification.

Gamification is based on the game elements features.

### **Gamification Learning Principles**

According to Gee (2013) good video games recruit good learning principles, principles supported by current research in Cognitive Science. This happens because good video games combine challenge and learning through motivating and entertaining scenarios for the players. Good games are very successful at engaging and driving continuous use within the players. Gee (2013), in his book *Good Video Games and Good Learning: Collected Essays on Video Games, Learning and Literacy (New Literacies and Digital Epistemologies)* offers a clear and broad elucidation about the learning principles good

video games integrate, in total, the author encompasses sixteen learning principles, those are:

1. **Identity:** players shape a sense of identity throughout the video games. Having a sense of identity fosters a better commitment of the players towards the act, learn and way to play inside the games.
2. **Interaction:** In good video games, players interact with the game in the way they act and make decisions. Once players make decisions, the game answers providing feedback and posing new problems.
3. **Production:** Video games players are not just consumers but they are creators as well (Gee, Paul, 2003). In schools, students should co-write the domain and the curriculum they are to master, they should have a more active participation for creating and not only consuming the study plans schools offer.
4. **Risk taking:** When players fail in video games, they hold few consequences in comparison to consequences in real life. Thereby, players are encouraged to take more risks and try new things. As Gee, P (2003) says, failing in a video game is good because players use their initial failures to find the game's patterns and gain feedback.
5. **Customization:** Games proffer a level of customization so that players can play and prosper at their capability levels according to their learning and playing styles. Thanks to the risk-taking principle, players can endeavor into different levels and new styles for succeeding.
6. **Agency:** players have a connotation of control over what they are performing in the game. According to Gee, P (2003), this sense of ownership rarely takes place in school.

7. **Well-Order Problems:** in good video games, the gaming environment contains difficulties that naturally lead into one another, allowing a player's mastery to grow and evolve.
8. **Challenge and Consolidation:** games offer challenging problems and permit them to solve those problems until they have routinized the solutions.  
Afterwards, another problem situation is presented creating an opportunity where players must connect prior masteries with the new learnings to succeed. Mastery takes place through repetition.
9. **Just in Time and On Demand:** players receive information as they need when they can use it and not before. As well, it is available at any time they need it. Schools should work this way, offering just on time concepts and not out of students' necessities.
10. **Situated Meanings:** players learn new vocabulary by experiencing them within the game situations (actions, dialogues, pictures). Vocabulary has in situ meanings not as it happens in some practices where they are not attached to meaningful situations.
11. **Pleasantly Frustrating:** The game is designed to frustrate the player in a situation where they feel challenged and as well capable of overcoming the circumstances faced.
12. **System Thinking:** games encourage players to think about associations that lead to a bigger goal, not just secluded events, facts or skills.
13. **Explore, Think Laterally, Rethink Goals:** in good video games, players are encouraged to explore and consider different courses of action laterally and not in a linear form.

14. **Smart Tools and Distributed Knowledge:** tools found in games help students understand the world. Through using them, they gain self-assurance to share their knowledge with others.
15. **Cross-Functional Teams:** in cooperative games, players must share their own individual knowledge and skills in order to integrate them and coordinate for accomplishing their goals.
16. **Performance Before Competence:** players can perform before they are competent as language acquisition works. In schools, sometimes students are demanded to competence when they have not performed enough in the domain that is being learnt.

Thus, as Gee (2013) articulates, this is not about “use games in school” but about applying the gamification principles so the same excitement, challenge, learning and fun take place within educational scenarios, for this very study, meaningful English language progressions within virtual milieus. Education needs vital changes adapted to the new realities so humans enjoy learning; gamification learning principles are one door leading to this objective.

### **Game Elements**

In the first place, as Figueroa (2015) elucidated, game elements are the regular design patterns that design the games (Mazo, 2020). To understand the conceptions of game design elements, it is attention-grabbing to read Tenório, Reinaldo, de Góis, & Lopes’ (2017) explanation where the authors compare game design elements with a toolbox where there are at dispose different tools to perform different activities. These tools are put together through a systematic and creative design in order to achieve goals.

Many of the game elements are mostly seen in video games and games nowadays, these elements include: points, badges, leaderboards, progression charts/progress bars, performance graphs, quests, levels, avatars, social elements, and rewards. These elements have different purposes and can be adapted to basically any work (Strmečki, Bernik, and Danijel 2015; Tenório, Reinaldo, de Góis, & Lopes, 2017; Zichermann and Cunningham, 2011). Within this conceptual framework, there will be enlightened principal elements concerning the current study:

In the first place, there are points; they are the numeric accumulation based on certain activities (Figuroa, 2015). As Zichermann and Cunningham (2011) explained in their book, points are important regardless they have an individual or group affiliation, and, they are absolute required for gamified scenarios. Zichermann and Cunningham (2011) present five kind of point systems. In the first place there are *experience points* (XP) which are the most important ones; experience points are how players watch, rank and guide their players. In the second place, there are *redeemable points* (RD) which are used for trading things. The third points system is named skill points; they are a set of bonus points that allow the player gain XP or RD. fourthly, *karma points*. The main objective of karma points is to give points away to create behavioral paths for altruism and user recompense. The fifth ones are the *reputations points* whose main purpose is to act as a proxy for trust.

In the second place there are *leaderboards*. They are a visual representation of the player's development and achievement. With this element, players can keep track of their progress, these can be either public or private and they are tools for taking social incentive inside the system (Azzouz & Gutiérrez, 2020; Tenório, Reinaldo, de Góis, & Lopes, 2017; Zichermann and Cunningham, 2011). Zichermann and Cunningham (2011) present two types of leaderboards: The *no-disincentive leaderboards* where the players are always



going to be put in the middle no matter where players fall in the ranking order. And, the *infinite leaderboards* where no player ever falls or gets jammed. Azzouz & Gutiérrez (2020) make clear within their systematic review that leaderboards depend on the learner's personality since they are usually public and not all learners/players like to be compared and exposed against others, this causing adverse effects from positive learning.

In the third place of game elements there are *levels*. They indicate progress and serves for allowing players to know where they stand within the gaming experience over the time (Zichermann and Cunningham, 2011). In e-learning environments, levels are linked to time management and they are not created as a game looking change, but rather as chapters in a narrative (Strmečki, Bernik, and Danijel, 2015).

Fourthly, there are *avatars* which are the visual representation as an icon or figure of the players (Figuroa, 2015; Tenório, Reinaldo, de Góis, & Lopes, 2017). Usually, when applying gamification in virtual environments students can personalize their avatars and make customizations as they go forward through the learning progressions (Strmečki, Bernik, and Danijel, 2015).

A fifth element in gamification is *badges*. In e-learning, badges are a virtual graphic representation of achievements reflected by the players' actions and contributions related to certain accomplishments. Badges are usually obtained when specific tasks or events are completed (Strmečki, Bernik, and Danijel, 2015; Tenório, Reinaldo, de Góis, & Lopes, 2017).

The sixth element in gamification are *challenges* and *quests*. According to Zichermann and Cunningham (2011), challenges and quests address the players' direction for what to do within the context of the gamified experience. Quests are created as a big problem, the problem is presented to the students and their mission is to get through the

levels, challenges, earn points and badges and master as much as they can. With regards to the previous idea, challenges are checkpoints where students can test their learning progress and can only succeed by having a determined set of points or score above average (Strmečki, Bernik, and Danijel, 2015). Within the quests ground, Zichermann and Cunningham (2011) explain that cooperative quests are the most difficult ones to be achieved since a group of people must work in harmonized way to achieve certain goals.

Another important element is the *virtual goods*. They are rewards with perceived value within the game. Players can get them with achieved scores and they usually reward user's action or behavior (Tenório, Reinaldo, de Góis, & Lopes, 2017). The eighth element is *feedback*. Appealing to Zichermann and Cunningham (2011) words, this is one of the most important and genuine game mechanics, the cornerstone of gamification. Feedback is defined as returning to players and informing them in what position they are at a present time. As well, there is the visual feedback for tasks that need to be performed, what is accomplished, what proportion of whole e-course is achieved, how many points and what level is student on (Strmečki, Bernik, and Danijel, 2015).

The last relevant element regarding this study is the *freedom to fail*. Students are allowed to experiment, there are no restrictions on what they are permitted to do or when. Students can have limitless chances in the sake of learning, students can go back and forward testing their knowledge, if students fail, they can return and try over again (Strmečki, Bernik, and Danijel, 2015). As Gee, P (2008) explains, the role of failure in video games allows players start again taking risks and trying new hypotheses, situations that on its contrary, may be too expensive in scenarios like the school.

Game elements are useful for the current design since they could provide a motivation factor among students to engage and achieve more success, mainly, in virtual

environments (Tenório, Reinaldo, de Góis, & Lopes', 2017). As well, game elements enhance the teaching and learning process in L2 (Figueroa, 2015). Together, game elements could serve as a main tool for promoting motivation, learning through collaboration, knowledge sharing and engagement in L2 processes, the challenge is to gather the right elements that truly promote learning (Tenório, Reinaldo, de Góis, & Lopes', 2017).

### **Language Learning and Teaching**

To have better understanding surrounding the current study, it is necessary to understand the concept of language learning and teaching. As Brown, D (2007) notes, learning a language is an intricate enterprise; the learner's personality struggles between the mother's tongue bounds and the new language, cultural, way of thinking, feeling and acting bounds (Mora, 2014).

In the first place, Brown, D (2007) refers that language characterizes as systematic, as a set of vocal or visual arbitrary symbols that have conventionalized meanings. Language is for communication operating within social or cultural speeches. It is essentially human although is not limited only to humans. Language is acquired by all people in much the same way-language and language learning both have universal characteristics.

Regarding the constructs of learning and teaching, which cannot be defined apart since they are co-related (Brown, 2007; Figueroa 2015), Brown (2007) remarks that learning is acquisition, is the retention of information or skills that implies storage systems, memory and cognitive organization. As well, Brown (2007) elucidates: "*learning involves active, conscious focus on and acting upon events outside or inside the organism*" (page 7). It is a perpetual progression but subject to forgetting, learning demands some form of

practice or reinforced practice and is a change in behavior. As stated by Brown, D (2007), these are the variables at stake when learning of a second language happens.

Additionally, Brown, D (2007) defines teaching as: “*guiding and facilitating learning, enabling the learner to learn, setting the conditions for learning (page 7).*” It is important to remark Brown’s (2007) clarifications regarding teaching when he says that it is about understanding how the learner learns since it is the basis for determining the education philosophies, the teaching styles, approaches, methods and classroom techniques.

For the current study, the second language is English: this is the language established by the educational institution and, it will be referred as L2.

### **Virtual Learning Environments**

Virtual learning environments (VLE) are web-based e-learning instruments that offer support to students and teachers within the learning-teaching processes. Virtual environments allow students to follow their own learning pace and time restrictions (Tenório, Reinaldo, de Góis, & Lopes, 2018). In contrast to this definition, the MEN (2017) defined virtual education as “*online education*”; it is the development of formation programs established within cyberspace that seeks to provide training processes supported by the TIC. It is chief to make clear that it is not about distance education.

As remarked by Tenório, Reinaldo, de Góis, & Lopes (2018), Virtual learning environments provide acquainted environments for digital natives supporting their access to digital content. The teaching and learning processes inside the cyberspace require students to be autonomous and active participants in the construction of the knowledge as well as teachers must assume the role of moderators promoting the development of meaning. Tenório, Reinaldo, de Góis, & Lopes (2018) make clear that working with students,

through cyberspace, requires students to have a high degree of motivation, which, many times, is not present in virtual learning environments.

### **Test Preparation**

Messick (1982) provided an all-encompassing definition for test preparation as “any intervention procedure specifically undertaken to improve test scores, whether by improving the skills measured by the test or by improving the skills for taking the test, or both” (p. 70). It is important to make clear that Messick (1982) coined a key term for test preparation and it is “coaching”.

Regarding test preparations styles, as Alderson & Hamp-Lyons (1996) articulated in their study *TOEFL preparation courses: a study of washback*; test preparation strategies for English proficiency exams, in their case TOEFL, vary depending on the teachers’ styles. There are different patterns in lessons when instructing or coaching for an English test to when the lessons are designed for a “regular” English class. In test preparation, teachers usually have a habit of finding connections in two aspects; first, teachers tend to link their preferred teaching methods and strategies to the ones of test preparation, and second, teachers usually find the way to connect regular classes content to the test preparation. Nevertheless, Alderson & Hamp-Lyons (1996) remarked that when teachers bestow innovative strategies for test preparation, in this very case it could be gamification, lessons become ideal scenarios for two phenomena take place: L2 meaningful learning and better test performances.

Lastly, it is appealing Barry, Dunn & Berry (2021) characterization about test preparation in language testing, the authors call it the “shadow education” since as they express: “The metaphor of ‘shadow’ is used because this type of private, supplementary

tutoring imitates the mainstream test system in as much as the tutoring provided is matched to the test being prepared for.” (Barry, Dunn & Berry, 2021, page 14).

### **Opening Up a Space for Gamification in My Classroom**

During the second semester of my masters’ program, I came across with the concept of gamification. Once having read about it, I imagined the many potentials that gamification could bring to my EL students. I began to feel they were at a disadvantage as they were getting prepared, for their certification exam in eleventh grade, through simple do-correct-and-next lessons. Besides, when preparing students for their certification exam, it seemed to me that the process was overwhelming and frustrating since the exam, the *B2 First* test of *Cambridge*, could be really demanding in terms of: high English proficiency levels displayed, advanced and complex grammar structures, wide range of vocabulary expected, high-level readings and an intricate English register, British. Therefore, students were in a detrimental position since they must not only foster their English proficiency levels but, at the same time, get prepared for an international certification test. As a result, I became concerned about providing motivational, challenging and meaningful English learning practices in the direction of preparing the students for their L2 certification exam, consequently, gamification showed up as an alternative to provide the classroom all these characteristics.

From my personal experience as teacher-gamer and researcher, gamification seemed to me an appealing and innovative way to start breaking old-fashioned paradigms in terms of preparing students for their L2 certification exam, and, as well, of bringing up meaningful English learning practices. Of course, I questioned myself how I would do so. In my early searches of gamification, I found that the application of gamification framed for English test preparation aligned with what Burke (2014), Gee (2003), Kapp (2012),

Vargas-Macías, Rodríguez-Hernández & Sánchez-Saenz (2020) and, Zichermann and Cunningham (2011) referred as gamification.

### **Connecting Gamification to English Test Preparation through Virtual Lessons**

The notion of gamification for English proficiency test preparation merged my research's fundamental concepts: gamification, meaningful English learning practices, more significant L2 test preparation processes and engaging lessons in virtual environments. Gamification provided the opportunity to make L2 test training a significant experience in virtual lessons. Basically, it permits to integrate the L2 macro-skills and micro-skills mastering through involving and encouraging EL students in a wide variety of innovative activities (Burke, 2014; Gee, 2013; Tenório, Reinaldo, de Góis, & Lopes, 2017) towards a L2 test preparation.

Later, test preparation allowed me to engage gamification because of its impact on user motivation and learning. As Brown (2007) expressed, motivation has been consistently related to meaningful learning. Thus, through gamification learners not only get prepared for L2 test but learn as well. As Qin (2013) reported in her study *Does Test Preparation Work? Implication*, where the author was investigating test preparation effects on improving language proficiency test scores, provided an important insight where the author concluded that test preparation improves scores but it still lacks meaningful learning processes rather than just acquiring strategies to apply it through a drilling approach. Nonetheless, Qin (2013) remarks four underpinning practices that proved to partake positive effects on test scoring and language performance, those were: test training through narrowing down the curriculum, the use of socio-affective strategies, language skills development strategies and rehearsal test-taking skills. Thus, test preparation could engage

gamification in order to cover the previously mentioned practices and, even, provide more meaningful ones.

Gamification turns into an ideal strategy since, As Alderson & Hamp-Lyons (1996) found out in their L2 test preparation study; when students are the center of the lessons with more space to interact, they work from individual and cooperative learning, and lessons are positioned in innovative and assertive contexts of the learners, L2 learning and test preparation both can take place. Gamification within the classroom pursues to find and match these preceding characteristics so lessons become ideal, motivating and engaging scenarios for meaningful L2 progressions.

I, as a teacher in a teenager's school setting, would like to rise above from traditional language learning and teaching in virtual education environments, I would like to go beyond by developing in EL learners certain skills they acquire from gamification so that they not only succeed in a test but, first, they have solid language learning processes and, furthermore, transcend taking them into their real-life contexts so they could better overcome life matters. As Burke (2014) referred, the goal of gamification is to motivate people to change behaviors, develop skills and drive innovation, gamification focuses on players to achieve their goals, in this case, they apply it to reach their life goals and find them challenging rather than discouraging.

L2 test preparation demands more significant and enriching teaching processes linked to students' new realities. Every day, education is facing drastic changes in technology and in their generations' learning and life styles. Therefore, implementing gamification for L2 test preparation may not only permit them to have better performances in L2 test taking but will create a challenging and motivating atmosphere in the sake of substantial learning scenarios.



## **Chapter Two**

### **Reviewing Gamification in Virtual Environments, Gamification in English Language**

#### **Learning and L2 Test Preparation**

Giving the need and rising interest of both, improving virtual lessons pedagogical practices moored to students' new realities and contexts, as well as the L2 test preparation on the way to provide meaningful second language practices in Colombia, the application of gamification inside virtual lessons emerges as a possible innovative decision to foster evocative learning and teaching practices.

The aim of this chapter is to provide a pragmatic review of the literature surrounding gamification, virtual education and test preparation in English lessons close to meaningful language learning. These areas of knowledge are quite extensive as they may intersect with multiple frameworks and multiple realities. The idea within this literature review is to narrow it down into four specific and relevant contexts: gamification per se, virtual education, English language learning/teaching and L2 test preparation. For the present review, I examined significant books, research and articles conducted in the last decades to obtain the relevant concepts regarding this study. The literature supporting this study is mostly based on gamification, virtual education, language learning and teaching and L2 test preparation. As well, I included books that are fundamental pillars in terms of gamification.

The objective of this literature review is to become familiar with the main paradigms, considerations, benefits and difficulties concerning virtual education, gamification, learning/teaching English in Colombia and L2 test preparation in order to support this research. Also, it is intended to identify a methodology design and find the breaches in those fields.

## **Gamification: What Is Relevant for My Study?**

Keeping in mind the already established problem of this current research, an initial database search began in order to know different studies, books and articles whirling around gamification. The search embraced international, national and local contexts. The variables established for the search were aligned with the hub of this research: gamification, gamification in L2 and gamification in test preparation. In terms of literature, among the most popular trends concerning gamification, it could be found gamification mainly in businesses and in education frameworks. Nevertheless, in the field of gamification for L2 test preparation, the information is very limited or non-existing.

Amid the popular literature, several sources showed up important for the current research. In the first place, Gee (2007), who is considered the godfather in the field of gamification, provides significant theoretical perspectives in Gamification. From his work, two relevant books emerge, one of them is *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*, this book served as one main inspiration for the current research. In this book, the author argues how good computer games and video games designs enroll learning principles, supported by cognitive research, that can be used in other settings such as business, family and, relevant to this study, education.

Gee (2007) remarks how the use of games and game technologies for learning content and skills is becoming more and more pervasive. The previously mentioned matter takes understanding when the author presents the principles that good games have; they are always contextualized, provide good and useful information to the players, the goals and purposes are not apart from the people's realities. As well, Gee (2007) remarks how good games find ways to put information where the player moves through, a player that makes clear the meaning of that information and applies to the world. Furthermore, the author

claims that learning must be presented, as good video games do, in a fruitful order that keeps a certain challenging level but does not become demotivating. Finally, Gee (2007) highlights the idea that the more the people can recreate in a game, the learning will be deeper and quite meaningful. This book has been the pillar of many current investigations based on gamification.

It is also important to bring his book *Learning and Games. The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games, and Learning*, within this volume, through this work, Paul Gee (2008) elucidates how good video games take players into good learning and that is because of the game design. The author explains how newer research about learning evidences that we do not learn through abstract symbols but through the manipulation of the experiences; people store these experiences in their minds and run simulations with them.

Good video games allow experiences to meet certain conditions, these conditions are the ones that take the player into learning and problem-solving experiences (Gee, 2008). James Gee (2008) discusses that presenting specific goals, interpreting the goals set up, partaking immediate feedback, recognizing and assessing errors, having an ample range of opportunities and learning from the others' interpreted experiences are learning principles that must be taken into education. Furthermore, the author refers how good games allow participation in social communities where they can construct their own identities, and moreover, where the players must share their experiences (collaboration) in order to achieve certain goals.

In contrast to the prior academic understandings about gamification brought by James Gee (2007, 2008), Sheldon, (2012), in his book *The multiplayer classroom: Designing coursework as a game* illustrates how his lessons were presented into a multiplayer classroom experience in the vein of a quiet known game *World of Warcraft*.

This is a case study where is shown how a practical application of gamification principles inside the classroom can beat the breach between traditional education into engaging, meaningful and challenging education.

Sheldon, (2012) elucidates how the gamification principles are present throughout all the course and alter the typical approaches; students' presentations turn into quests, the team work in class becomes guilds' representations, students must decide avatars where they display characteristics they like to represent, different evaluation moments are called fighting monsters and crafting means making compositions. This case study was held in a 40 students' course and six teams were made (guilds). Sheldon (2012) points out that, for the success implementation of gamification, it is key that the academic environment has a flexible curriculum and assessment process.

In terms of other important studies relevant for the current research, Vargas-Macías, Rodríguez-Hernández, & Sánchez-Saenz (2020) presented exploratory research which main objective was to recognize how elements, techniques and mechanics of games have been implemented in learning and training taking place through ICT-mediated education. This research supports the current study since shows how the positive implementation of gamification principles, in a first step, encompassed diverse active learning styles.

Additionally, Vargas-Macías, Rodríguez-Hernández, & Sánchez-Saenz (2020) analyze how, in comparison to traditional groups, the ones that implemented gamification are more motivated, satisfied and trained. However, it is to remark that within the study it is emphasized the idea that successful implementation of gamification is attached to a good design of the lessons and the proposed goals. Furthermore, Vargas-Macías, Rodríguez-Hernández, & Sánchez-Saenz, (2020) analyzed evidence that gamification contributes to enhance students' behavior when working with electronic learning platforms. The authors

determined that the implementation of gamification, in education, permits having a revolutionized educational environment where takes place active learning and interaction among the participants.

### **Motivation, Learning and Gamification**

In terms of motivation, learning and gamification, Burke (2014), who is one of the leading experts and main academics when it comes about applying gamification into several fields. The author, who appeals on Gartner's proven research methodology, in his book *Gamify: How Gamification Motivates People to Do Extraordinary Things*, refers that gamification is a powerful approach to be used for engaging and motivating people to achieve their purposes as well when it comes about achieving organizational goals.

Brian Burke (2014) implies that gamification encourages people to change behaviors, develop skills and enterprise modernization; the key of gamification is to guide people to take part on challenging, emotional and motivating contexts that permit people achieving projected objectives. As well relevant for this research, Burke (2014) expresses that we all have been motivated by the same things but, where people must concentrate, is in the changes of the world where we live in; we live in a world where many communication barriers have been beaten by technology and now people are connected among each other more than any other time, this is the time, for all of us winning together not as individuals but as one human race.

Regarding Burke's ideas about motivation, he expresses that learning takes place all the time and at any place. People tend to classify experiences (Gee, 2008) and adapt knowledge. This happens because motivation is tightly linked to acquire a new skill or knowledge; learners tend to perform better when they are intrinsically motivated (Gee, 2008; Sailer et al 2013; Burke 2014). One good example of this is when Gee, P (2008)

explains how video games appear to be much more motivating than school. This happens because video games have characteristics that enable learning and motivation. One key characteristic is the role of failure; when players fail in video games, they can lower the price of failure and start over again to try out new hypothesis or take new risks to achieve what is intended. Gee, (2008) explains that in the schools, this usually does not take place because the price or failure is always too high.

As well, Gee, (2008) remarks another two key motivational aspects of video games: competition and collaboration. Players see competition motivating and as social interaction, but the competition is organized in to their capacities and levels, not into out-of-the-skills situations. Although, Gee, (2008) elucidates that the main motivational factors players find in video games are: ownership and agency. When players are able to cocreate their worlds and shape their experiences, they become active producers rather than passive recipes.

Alternatively, with regard to extrinsic motivation, it has shown not to provide profound learning over time, even in gamified scenarios (Hanus & Fox, 2015). As Burke (2014) explains, extrinsic motivation brings a short-term boost of learners' motivation but it tends to wear off with time decreasing the motivation in long periods of time. This does not imply that extrinsic motivational features must not be used in the classroom. On the contrary, these extrinsic motivational elements can be unified into activities and used in a way that strengthens students' intrinsic motivation and actions (Landers, 2014). Consequently, gamification can help to foster the extrinsic and intrinsic motivation but it is strongly dependent on how they are implemented and integrated in the classroom (Sailer et al 2013).

As Sailer et al (2013) pointed out in their analysis of different theories of motivation, gamification has the potential to foster motivation in different contexts. The

authors make the observation that game elements are linked to motivational mechanisms found in many theories and research. However, Sailer et al (2013) remark that there are three relevant components when inquiring gamification through motivation: target group or person, gamification environment and context.

Motivation is especially important in language learning. As Brown (2007) uttered, an educator cannot begin to instruct without first attending the students' anxieties, motivations and other personality fluctuations. As in many different settings, motivation is a key factor for a successful learning process but at the same time, motivation is hard to engage into the classroom. As well, Brown (2007) explains how intrinsic motivation plays a much more important role in the classroom processes. Vargas-Macías, Rodríguez-Hernandez, & Sánchez-Sáenz (2020) found that with the application of gamification in L2 learning environments students may feel much more motivated. However, it is important to make clear that Vargas-Macías, Rodríguez-Hernandez, & Sánchez-Sáenz (2020) found that the application of gamification in one of the institutions was not as motivating as when applying non-game context, thus, suggesting applying certain gamification mechanisms according to the educational environments.

Dörnyei (2014) outlines three motivational principles in learning: one, there must be more motivation rather than recompense and castigation. Secondly, it is not only about creating motivation in learning but also about preserving and guarding it through the same. And third, in learning it gains more value the quality and not the quantity of the motivational strategies used in learning process. Dörnyei (2014) remarks that competition, cooperation and making learning activities more innovative and less monotonous are fundamental motivational strategies within learning and teaching environments. Keeping the prior ideas in mind, Gamification provides numerous of the principles and methods to

support contextualized and meaningful motivational strategies in L2 learning and instruction dealing with the cluster of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Gee, 2008; Burke, 2014; Vargas-Macías, Rodríguez-Hernandez, & Sánchez-Sáenz 2020; Mora, Gee, Hernández, Castaño, Orrego, & Ramírez 2020).

### **Gamification in L2 Learning and Teaching**

To support gamification as a relevant strategy to foster L2 important learning, Figueroa (2015) provides an academic review about the relationship between gamification and learning. Figueroa examines how one of the mayor competences currently is to master a second language. As a first stance, the author encompasses some features with regards the learning of a second language such as strategies, methods, definition of learning, theories in language acquisition and understanding language and second language.

The previously presented ideas are quite related to this study since the context takes place in learning and teaching English as a second language. Keeping in mind the learning of the second language, the author refers lessons are integrating innovative concepts in order to motivate learners to accomplish mastering of the language. One of those emerging concepts is gamification. Figueroa explains how gamification is the use of game elements and game design structures into non-game contexts. An approach that empowers and engages learners into positive and meaningful experiences. In addition to this, the author concludes that gamification enhances positively the learning of the second language in all the skills and, additionally, motivates collaboration and interaction in the classroom.

Regarding studies and mapping in gamification in learning, De Sousa Borges, Durelli, Reis, and Isotani (2014) made a systematic mapping over 357 papers on gamification; from these 357 papers, only 48 were related to the educational field, and, among the 48 studies, only 26 papers met requirements of inclusion and exclusion in



learning regarding gamification. After De Sousa Borges, Durelli, Reis, and Isotani (2014) conducted the mapping study, several relevant conclusions were left with regards to gamification and learning: in the first place, the authors concluded that there are several studies regarding gamification in education but most of them were linked to the possible benefits of gamification in education but with little or no factual application within the educational field.

Furthermore, De Sousa Borges, Durelli, Reis, and Isotani (2014) concluded that gamification was mostly applied in higher education rather than in elementary education. Besides, another conclusive idea, since gamification takes elements from video or computer games, virtual environments become the most logical and suitable space where to apply the approach. Concerning the preceding idea, Figueroa (2015) highlights that L2 teachers are implementing several teaching strategies that use plenty of ICT owing to the current generations who are considered to be digital natives, generations who learn and process information differently; current generations are used to blogging, texting online, gaming and social networking. And, another important conclusion De Sousa Borges, Durelli, Reis, and Isotani (2014) remark is, to accurately comprehend the gamification approach in learning, there is still a need to foster more research with room for new discoveries and enhancements.

Sailer & Homner (2020) conducted a meta-analysis to synthesize research findings in gamification and learning; the authors concluded that gamification has got an increasing attention in learning and teaching due to its potential to foster motivation and learning inside the classroom. Sailer & Homner (2020) claim to have found that gamification in learning works because the significant and positive effects on cognitive, motivational and behavioral results. Nevertheless, within the meta-analysis, Sailer & Homner (2020) observe

that there is still an enormous need to conduct high-quality research and applying gamification designs to qualify more conclusive ideas with regards to gamification and learning (Vargas-Macías, Rodríguez-Hernandez, & Sánchez-Sáenz 2020).

Furthermore, Azzouz & Gutiérrez, (2020) conducted a recent systematic review over 68 papers about the effects of gamification on students' motivation and learning in L2 acquisition in higher education. Among their main conclusions, Azzouz & Gutiérrez (2020) utter that, up to now, gamification has proved to be an efficient approach to bring up engagement and motivation in L2 learning. Nevertheless, another conclusive and crucial idea for the current study is that there are too few studies in terms applying gamification in L2 environments. Moreover, there is a strong lack of unified discourses among researchers (Hamari, Koivisto, & Sarsa, 2014), and, for further research, it is important to focus on the students' affective states and solid learning outcomes.

### **Gamification in Virtual Environments**

After exploring different literature about the impact of gamification in virtual environments, two important studies arise to provide more illustration to the current state of affairs. This first one is a study by Strmečki, Bernik, and Danijel (2015). This paper discusses the development stages of hosting gamification into e-learning schemes, various gamification design elements and their appropriateness for usage in e-learning systems.

Strmečki, Andrija & Radosevic (2015) discussed the importance of understanding the core of the games: goal focused activities, rewards mechanisms and progress tracking. In addition, the authors balance different gamification definitions from various sources where all of them conclude that the most common description is the inclusion of game mechanics, dynamics, aesthetics and game thinking in non-game systems. Moreover, the authors remark that when implementing gamification approach, it is essential to consider

the learners' types and their habits. As a final point, the authors discuss elements of gamification with regards to e-learning environment, analyzing and giving advice of how they should be encompassed within the lessons.

As 21<sup>st</sup> century goes by, the arena of second language learning and teaching is becoming more and more technology focused, (Figueroa, 2015; Strmečki, Bernik, and Danijel 2015; Tenório, Reinaldo, de Góis, & Lopes 2017). Furthermore, nowadays learners handle and process information differently and, they are aware of the potential benefits of the internet and the social construction around it. Gamification pops up as a motivational, technologically innovative and logical alternative to promote L2 learning, mostly, in e-learning platforms since it takes many elements from video or computer games (Borges, Durelli, Reis, and Isotani 2014; Figueroa, 2015) and allows applying many design elements such as trophies, badges, points, levels, customizations, leaderboards, feedback, social action and forth, elements that best fit in virtual environments (Strmečki, Bernik, and Danijel 2015).

Strmečki, Bernik, and Danijel (2015) in their study presented one main conclusion relevant to this research; before applying gamification into the lessons, it becomes imperious to recognize what kind of people and learners there are in the classroom. This reason takes place because not all learners and people like competition, play games, or simply, because they do not need more extra motivation. Not keeping in mind this precept may result in adverse learning progressions when employing gamification for L2 practices in the virtual classroom. Strmečki, Bernik, and Danijel (2015) also explain that, for successfully apply gamification in e-learning, it is fundamental to understand the core of games: goals focused activities, reward mechanism and progress tracking.

Appealing to Strmečki, Bernik, and Danijel (2015) scheme, when applying gamification in e-learning it should follow the five phases of system development: in the first phase, there must be an *analysis*, it means, identify goals to be achieved keeping in mind pedagogical, technological and design aspects. Secondly, the *design*. It is the identification of activities that can be gamified and establish elements and spot checks. The third one is *development*. Develop the selected gamified design elements and integrate them into learning. Fourth, *implementation*. It is to introduce the system to the learners, monitor it and collect feedback to apply adaptations. Fifth, *evaluation*. Learners must evaluate the system, determine the level of accomplishment of the objectives, and apply changes according to the evaluation.

With regards to the game elements applied into virtual environments, a second important study shows up from Tenório, Reinaldo, de Góis, & Lopes (2017), who, through a systematic literature review of how gamification is applied into different virtual scenarios, identified the main ones commonly used in virtual classes: avatars, badges, leaderboards, levels, points, social graphs, teams and virtual goods. One of the main conclusions is that badges, points and leaderboards are the most predominant gamification elements executed in virtual spaces. Although, Tenório, Reinaldo, de Góis, & Lopes (2017) explained that not all the game elements presented positive results since they distracted learners from their real pedagogical purposes. One critical case was shown when making use of leaderboards; the concern is that students may feel their motivation affected since it endorses explicit competition, but, as Strmečki, Bernik, and Danijel (2015) observed that one good approach is to present multiple leaderboards. But, Tenório, Reinaldo, de Góis, & Lopes (2017) remark the gamification elements as a way to promote motivation, collaborate learning,

knowledge sharing and engagement. Elements must be carefully applied so they offer meaningful learning.

This is an important systematic literature review for the current research, since it was elaborated by different authors who analyzed journals and collected studies related to gamification within the virtual learning education. In the first place, Tenório, Reinaldo, de Góis, & Lopes (2017) embrace the explication of the concept of gamification from different sources; they emphasize that this innovative approach emerges to foster the students' engagement, motivation and participation within their learning processes. Furthermore, Tenório, Reinaldo, de Góis, & Lopes (2017) make clear that gamification is not about just creating and playing games in non-game contexts; it is about understanding that there are tools that are helpful to achieve goals and that these goals must be mainly pedagogical rather than merely entertaining, tools are mainly to foster an environment that promotes learning within pedagogical projects.

Then, gamification intends to make virtual environments funnier, innovative, challenging and engaging. Gamification supports students in gaining motivation and, with accurate and continuous feedback, in having steady stimulated learning atmospheres among the students.

### **Test Preparation in L2 Environments**

Keeping in mind Qin's (2013) empirical study about the practicality of test preparation on L2 tests and its impact on English learning, the author annotates that several washback studies, that investigate the effects on English test preparation on learning, showed that test preparation lessons do not have significantly larger effects on L2 learning in comparison to "typical" English language courses. Besides, the author highlights another conclusive idea, other studies related to test preparation for *IELTS* did not find significant

differences between students' scores of those who got test preparation and those who did not. It is important to remark that among the studies investigated by Qin (2013) none of them gave notions about their exact nature that remains underdocumented and underinvestigated. Nevertheless, the author remarks that in studies, where metacognitive and cognitive strategies were applied, there were positive and strong results in matters of test performance and L2 learning.

In addition, Qin (2013) found that the most frequently used test preparation strategies are: practicing test taking skills, drilling, memorizing and socioaffective strategies in turn, although the author stated that learning strategies fixated on the development via extensive and functional uses of L2 were scarcely, sometimes even taking to negative effect practices of the target language.

As well, it is important to remark on Alderson & Hamp-Lyons' (1996) study about the influence of *TOEFL* test preparation and L2 teaching. The authors construct important conclusions central to current study. In the first place, the authors highlight that there is little empirical evidence to support the either positive or negative effects in L2 test preparation and L2 teaching. Secondly, the authors call for more studies regarding the effects on test preparation in L2 and meaningful learning so more solid conclusions could be drawn out to strengthen better practices inside the classes. There is a need to start comprehending the influences that L2 learning has over the L2 test preparation focus. Thirdly, and very important, the authors focused on investigating common claims that usually take place when preparing students for test: unnatural teaching, inappropriate language learning and use of strategies, lessons only centered in the exam, high *TOEFL* scores with no proof of good proficiency L2 levels and, *TOEFL* aimed lessons instead of "real" English courses.

Alderson & Hamp-Lyons (1996) when comparing the strategies of two teachers regarding test preparation, they found one important outcome related to this research: when the teacher's classes are more interactive, with cooperative and individual efforts, as well as with presence of clear goals and real practices, meaningful L2 learning could happen through test preparation. Nonetheless, it is important to recall that the authors claim for more studies in order to compare results and, for the case the current research, it becomes an excellent source to contrast possible results.

Finally, Barry, Dunn & Berry (2021) presented an up-to-date study about test preparation comparing the L2 test takers similarities and differences among East/Southern Asia, Middle East and Central/South America candidates. In the first place, the authors expressed that test preparation, indeed, affects test scores and performances in different degrees. As well, Barry, Dunn & Berry (2021) emphasize that there are not cross-regional studies in language test preparation that consider the variables of gender and age. Furthermore, quite relevant for the present research, the authors found out that approaches for test training among the different regions have similar practices and materials. As well, the authors concluded that there are not huge differences when it comes about applying test preparation face-to-face approach versus the blended approaches. Even though, Barry, Dunn & Berry (2021) highlight the importance of providing more insights of this phenomenon through more research.

For this segment and the current research, it is important to elucidate that literature in L2 test preparation towards students' international certification is scarce. Different search engines were used to find academic work related to the current hub: *Google Scholar*, *Science.gov*, *Semantic Scholar*, *ResearchGate*, *ERIC* and so forth. In spite of today's

affluent access to information, it was challenging to find studies linked to this reality and, moreover, related to the Colombian L2 practices for test preparation.

### **What I Learned from The Literature**

After exploring a sample of studies, books and resources in relation to gamification and its implementation in the fields of virtual environments in addition to L2 learning, plus, L2 test preparation. I listed some important considerations to keep in mind for my research in the field of methodology. In the first place, qualitative research was the most common research approach applied within the studies. As well, there were comparative case studies that offered ideas on how gamification may or may not work in L2 virtual settings. The previous mentioned idea took me to the conclusion that conducting qualitative research for the current study is the best way to explore in-depth the social, personal and collective impacts of the study.

Regarding gamification and L2 test preparation, its literature was problematic to find, mainly, in the national and local context. This made me concerned with the lack of literature for this new arising phenomenon in Colombia. Most of the literature based on L2 test preparation was conducted abroad through qualitative research, particularly based on *TOEFL* and *IELTS* examinations which could help to understand and associate more ideas since the targeted exam for this study is *B2 First* formerly known as *FCE* from *Cambridge*. This shed light on the necessity to recognize and reflect upon the new realities surrounding the English language learning in terms of “English certifications” whose demand continue in growth together with the necessity of fostering more studies for comprehending and founding more real-attached and meaningful outcomes to comprehend more this new phenomenon.



The data collection was characterized by the usage of journals, semi-structured interviews, observations, videos, reflections, and students' artifacts. I noticed that there is great potential for gamification for L2 test preparation with conceivable positive learning outcomes. The studies presented in the field of test preparation took place mainly in universities while this one's context is high school. The literature review helped to give more relevance to my study because of the many potentials in terms of preparing students not only for a L2 test but providing meaningful learning of the second language, that, hopefully transcend into meta-classroom learnings for fulfilling life goals (Burke, 2014; Gee, 2003).

My study intends to start giving insights about the application of gamification in L2 test preparation for meaningful English learning processes and adding literature to the current phenomenon, mainly, in Colombia. The current research could be beneficial as L2 learning and test taking each day become more and more a priority and reality in Colombia.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Designing a Study on Gamification**

#### **Methodology**

In this chapter, I discuss the methodological characteristics and approach that underpinned this research framed within the gamification epitomes in second language teaching and learning. Additionally, the chapter restates the research question and provides description of the participants and the context of the study. Moreover, it labels how data was collected and analyzed. I conclude this chapter clarifying the trustworthiness of my investigation, as well as the relevant ethical issues involved.

#### **Research Design**

The investigation of gamification applied in L2 test preparation towards meaningful English language processes is framed within the qualitative research. It takes qualitative research because it includes examining what is learned in the classroom and its connection to the real-world events, as well, because it seeks out to analyze its connection to the social life of the learners (Lankshear & Knobel 2004; Saldaña, 2011; Van Sluys, Lewison, & Seely, 2006). As Saldaña (2018) explained, the idea through the qualitative research is to collect data for its analysis with a nonquantitative character; analyze the textual materials such as: observations, semi-structured interviews, field notes, and participants' texts.

Furthermore, keeping in mind Harklau's words (2011), there has been a consistent trend between research on second language teaching and learning and the qualitative approach since it deems with naturalistic language data sources. Additionally, as Creswell (2016) and Stake (2010) point out, qualitative research becomes a good choice for this study because it displays several elements of the qualitative research nature such as: report the voices of the participants, go out to the setting to collect data, observe how the process

takes place, focus on small number of participants or contexts, permits to explore in open-ended ways, provides a complex understanding of the problem, reflect on our own biases and experiences, creates multiple perspectives of the phenomenon and rises the voices of the marginalized groups. Many of these Characteristics present in the design of my study.

Another significant motivation for applying qualitative research is because, as Richards (2003) expresses in three key ideas; it is a first-hand analysis of the instruments that will permit us to understand the complexities and puzzles of the social context that will be studied. Besides, as Richards, K (2003) articulates, this approach will permit a person-centered enterprise ideal for the languages teaching field.

In addition, this research will partake within an ethnographic approach because, for this research, it is required to observe and interact with the study's participants in their real environment. Moreover, as Saldaña (2011) clarifies, this approach is used to support a designer's profounder understanding of the design problem and having a greater and more accurate notion about the cultural issues spinning around the study.

In this qualitative study, interpretation plays a chief role since I, the teacher-researcher, interpreted multiple forms of collected data. This study does not attempt to cover a wide range of population nor generalize the phenomenon being studied. On the contrary, this study intends to explore and analyze the individuality of the participants and their contexts. This study arises from my personal and professional need to foster my teaching and learning processes within the L2 classroom. Within this study, my students took the role of students-participants as it was intended to understand their perspectives, opinions, and experiences. It is essential to make clear that, in the position of teacher researcher, I do not try to impose my perceptions of the phenomenon to construe my

students' views, rather, my students' observations were used to understand the phenomenon (Arghode, 2012).

### **Research Question**

The following research question guided my study: *To What Extent the Application of Gamification Can Foster Significant English Test Practices towards Meaningful Processes of the L2 Language in Virtual Spaces?*

### **Sub-questions**

- To what extent gamification can foster effective L2 test preparation progressions?
- To what extent gamification might foster students' meaningful English language proficiency levels?
- To what extent could gamification be used in a meaningful way through the virtual lessons for better practices?

### **The Colombian English Language Context**

As Mejía (2012) denoted, the main goal of the government is emphasized on achieving the ideal of universal communication within the world's economy and with cultural openness through the English language. However, Mejía (2012) makes clear that the notion of learning of English, instead of fulfilling the prior ideas, it is being presented as a requirement to be competitive and successful in Colombia in order to have better curriculum vitae for more employment opportunities.

Additionally, analyzing the role of English in Colombia, the concept of its learning as a second/foreign language is a phenomenon that has been gaining importance in the last decades. Since the General Law of Education in the 1990s, the government has tried to

promote English as a second language in Colombia (Usma, 2009; González, A 2010; Gómez Sará, 2017; Mora et al 2019).

### **Research Context**

I conducted the current study within a private school located about 7 km from downtown Medellín, Colombia. Most of the school's student population is composed by Spanish-native speakers, although there is a small but considerable percentage of international students, mainly from North America, Europe and Africa. Most of the students come from middle class families, but; there is also a small portion of students who come from either wealthy families or low-income families.

The school offers three different programs: first, there is the *Presential or Basic* program which schedule is shorter than the other programs, students have 25 hours' lessons. Second, there is the *Emphasis* program where students have eight hours of English lessons a week, more than the average of standard programs. Third, there is the *Bilingual* program, the one where this current research is held; this study takes place within this program because, at the end of 11<sup>th</sup> grade, the last high school academic year in Colombia, students are meant to take a certification exam that is called *B2 First*. I saw this context as an opportunity to make a revolutionary change in the way students have been prepared for their L2 test and, furthermore, provide opportunities for a more substantial English language learning in virtual contexts.

The school adapted the national curriculum known by its Spanish name *Expedición Curriculo* comprising three sections: preschool, elementary school and high school. The study was completed in high school, inside the *Bilingual* program. Within this program, students have 37 hours of classes; it is important to make clear that mathematics with four hours, biology with two hours, and informatics with four more are addressed in English. In

matters of the English language subject, they receive 8 hours of classes a week. Subjects, different from the earlier mentioned, are taught in Spanish.

### **Participants**

For the current study, I selected the entire 11<sup>th</sup> graders bilingual class; they belong to one of my three English groups I have in my teaching schedule. This group consisted of twenty-six students, teenagers all of them, their ages go between 14 years old to 17 years old. Almost all students have Spanish as their L1 but there are two participants whose native language is English.

I collected all the data in the regular English hours. I decided to choose the participants of the current study based on Yin's (2011) ideas about *purposive sample* where the participants' selection is founded on "their expected richness and relevance of information in relation to the study's research questions. Richness and relevance include sources whose data are presumed to challenge and not just support a researcher's thinking about the research questions..." (page 311).

**Recruitment Procedures: Securing Consent.** In the first place, I arranged a meeting with the academic director and principal of the school to present the objective of the current study and its objectives. Subsequently, I presented the research project, the two main authorities of the school signed an informed letter of consent (See Appendix A) to approve the research that was to be carried out in my classroom. What I explained to them was that I had been applying the gamification mechanics, elements and components for not only preparing the students for their certification exam in 11<sup>th</sup> grade but, besides, for creating profound, contextualized and challenging L2 processes inside the classroom. Afterwards, I had a virtual meeting with the 11<sup>th</sup> graders and their parents where I presented my research proposal and asked for their cooperation to collect data in order to elaborate my

master’s thesis. Owing this, key concepts and goals of gamification, and their connection to test preparation, were explained to both students and their parents.

**Selecting Sample.** I started to collect data in April 2021. It took place during the virtual lessons for test preparation where gamification principles were applied. The first criterion for selecting the students-participants was the consent forms return; 26 were given to the legal guardians and 21 were returned to the teacher-researcher, this was the first criterion for the selection of my sample. Anyhow, I realized that collecting and analyzing the data for 21 students-participants would be time consuming so, I applied Purposive Sample (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004; Yin, 2011) and selected six students as participants.

When doing the process for the convenience sample, I listed some characteristics expected from the students-participants: in the first place, after explaining from many angles the concept of gamer and gamification, I selected between gamers and non-gamers students-participants, this is in order to choose students-participants who may offer contrary evidence or views in order to test rival explanations (Yin, 2011).

Table 1

*Gamers and Non-Gamers Participants*

<b>Gamer participant</b>	2	6	4
<b>Non-gamer participant</b>	1	3	5

Secondly, the other feature was to select students with self-confidence when expressing their opinions, ideas and providing suggestions. And thirdly, three representative levels of English proficiency levels (advanced, medium-high and medium) according to the bilingual high school program and, moreover, keeping in mind their

regular attendance to the virtual lessons to guarantee data collection. I selected a boy and a girl whose native language is English, a boy and girl with medium-high English proficiency levels and, a boy and girl with medium L2 proficiency levels.

Table 2

<b>English Proficiency Level*</b>	<b>Girl Student</b>	<b>Boy Student</b>
<b>Advanced</b>	Five	Two
<b>Intermediate-advanced</b>	One	Four
<b>Intermediate</b>	Three	Six

It is vital to illustrate that I wanted to have the same number of boys and girls in case of coming across into the topic of gender, as it could come up in the gamification and test preparation arenas. All the students-participants fulfilled the prior mentioned features.

**Ethical consideration and pseudonyms.** In order to protect the students' identities, I implemented pseudonyms that students themselves chose based on their own preferences. Regarding school confidentiality, I included neither its name nor easily-recognizable details, for this, in concordance with the participants' thoughts, numbers (gender-neutral) were used to nominate them. As a further measure of trustworthiness, I did not assess any of the activities that were part of the data collection. Professionally, it is my personal and professional duty to show respect to my students during my research; I established respect for their gamification practices and the ideas they expressed during class or outside class discussions. For this reason, I was vigilant to avoid manipulating their answers, comments, ideas, opinions and suggestions.

### **Gamification for L2 Test Preparation**



I implemented the Gamification strategy to foster L2 test preparation in my classroom for about 12 academic weeks. As referred in the first chapter, the application of gamification inside the classroom came from the necessity to foster meaningful, challenging, motivating and fruitful L2 virtual lessons (Gee, 2003; Kapp, 2012). Therefore, gamification revealed as an excellent chance to provide these characteristics and, probably, transcend them out of the classroom into students' everyday life (Gee, 2013). I will provide a description of how I began applying gamification mechanics, elements and learning principles I took into account in order to structure the process for L2 test preparation. Keeping in mind these prior notions, I started developing the fusion of gamification and L2 test preparation.

**Designing The Strategy.** The employment of gamification inside the English lessons started from basic ideas and, while perceiving positive or negative impacts in students' L2 proficiency and scoring, I adapted them in order to have more purposeful processes. As well, I made adaptations keeping in mind Kapp's (2012) idea about co-design: "Designing the elements together means that the fun and non-entertainment goals "grow up" together and are in harmony as opposed to fighting one another for dominance" (page 72). Gamification strategy was planned before its execution and it had Kapp's (2012) stages for ensuring success: (a) it was primordial to focus on specific learning objectives from the beginning and not subsequently the activities related with the class study plan. (b) It was established the design of the interactions, storylines, feedback and levels reflecting the main goal of the activities. (c) Co-design pace. (d) Afterwards, it was important to think about the level of the activity; it had to be a level that could allow participants to create opportunities to interact and feel involved to achieve the desired non-entertaining results. (e) Later, a compelling story linked to the main objectives was created to engage learners

as part of it. (f) And, finally, test and retest practices while conducting focus group discussions to comprehend the learners' thoughts as they experience.

Therefore, I presented the digital platform *Classcraft* as the means to apply gamification within the L2 test preparation processes in virtual classes. Anyhow, after implementing it for four weeks, I was compelled to stop using it since, as I analyzed in the fourth chapter, it presented several impasses through its application that were affecting the current teacher-researcher labor performances and students' processes.

Nevertheless, keeping in mind the previous stated situation, I implemented a new lesson plan of gamification over carefully designed virtual lessons via other gamified platforms and activities such as *Kahoot* and *Quizizz* (Guzmán, Mendoza and Tavera, 2018). As well, for the lesson plans designed, not only these platforms were implemented but they were integrated into an overall gamification process towards L2 test preparation for meaningful language processes.

However, this displacement from the *Classcraft* platform to other gamified tools for L2 test preparation lessons helped the current research to understand several key aspects mentioned in the literature review chapter: first, the importance in the teacher's role when adopting gamification in classes. Second, it gave some understanding about the current labor dynamics in schools and how they impact the implementation of these strategies. And, most importantly, it is permitted to analyze the contrast of just implementing gamification through a single mean like *Classcraft* to when several gamification activities are integrated into one lesson plan avoiding a dependency in one single tool.

### **Gamification for L2 Test Preparation**

*Classcraft digital platform.* Chief for the current research was the implementation of a digital platform that could promote gamified activities for non-entertaining school

curriculum (*B2 First* test preparation) through virtual environments; I determined to use *Classcraft* because it promoted the use of technology through better sensorial stimuli that could keep students' attention in large time spans (Hernández-Durán, Torres-Barreto, & Acuña-Rangel, 2020). The implementation of this platform took place within four weeks.

Besides, other two main important reasons of why using the platform *Classcraft* were: it permitted linking *Google Classroom* activities with the ones of the platform and, it offered a free version in the sake of more inclusion regarding economic issues. It is important to make clear that the institution, where this study is held, demands teachers to post activities in *Google Classroom* or *Google Forms* thus, this digital platform satisfied the conditions of the school.

Keeping in mind the students' L2 test preparation topics, objectives and parts, aided me to visualize what gamification elements and mechanics to implement for having possible positive outcomes within the *Classcraft* platform and preparing the lesson plans. It is vital to clarify beforehand that test preparation activities used to be based mainly, as Qin (2013) denoted, through test preparation strategies like: drilling, memorizing and loose test exercises. Thus, the planification was based on the same test practices but trying to afford meaningful L2 learning process and meaningful test preparation practices around gamification rather than going back to the traditional test preparation contexts (table 3).

Table 3

*Classcraft Activities for L2 Test Preparation*

<b><i>B2 First</i> Test Part Meant to Be Practiced or Fostered*</b>	<b>Objective</b>	<b>Gamification components and mechanics in <i>Classcraft</i> involved</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Use of English</b>	Students are meant to practice and apply complex	Challenges Competition Cooperation	Students practiced Use of English for test preparation

	grammar structures linked to vocabulary, idioms, fixed phrases, phrasal verbs and semantic precision.	Rewards Turns Guild's combat Feedback Levels Gifting Points	through <i>Boss Battles</i> ; these boss battles contained the same use of English exercises but, there are several bosses and each one of them presented a level of difficulty named by the teacher-researcher.
<b>Listening</b>	Students must be able to not only comprehend basic information through a listening but focus on detail, speakers' attitudes, feelings, identifying specific information and stated opinions or facts.	Immediate feedback Points Boss combats Virtual goods Avatar	For listening two main activities were designed: a quest named <i>Elves Ears</i> and <i>The Valley of the Deaf</i> . Students had to go over two paths and pass each stage; they could repeat this activity as many times as they wanted until mastering.
<b>Reading Comprehension</b>	Students must analyze and practice reading comprehension in the fields of cohesion, detail, opinions, specific information and implication.	Quest-storytelling Individual competition in the sake of the guild's growth. Content unlocking Narrative	The reading comprehension preparation for the <i>B2 First</i> exam has four parts, consequently, four stages were planned through a quest called <i>Let the Battle Continue</i> .
<b>Writing</b>	Candidates are meant to be able to master different types of writing such as essays, emails, reviews, articles, and, besides, the writing must be centralized in agreeing, disagreeing, giving	<i>Kudos: Shrine of the Ancients</i> Feedback Cooperation Points Levels	There is an option within <i>Classcraft</i> where students can post short text in a wall through a given instruction. Students could practice the writing part of the examination through these <i>Kudos</i> so everyone could

	opinions, reasons and contrasting them in possible conclusions.		socialize and compare their writing productions.
<b>Speaking</b>	Students must practice interactional and social language expressing opinions, ideas and facts through agreement, disagreement, speculation dynamics.	Boss combats Badges Gifting Points Levels <i>Random Events</i>	Students had the chance to practice L2 speaking through two means: <i>Random Events</i> where students are given a problem-situation and they must speak about it for the guild's well.

\* The exam grasps a British English register and evaluates the mentioned skills.

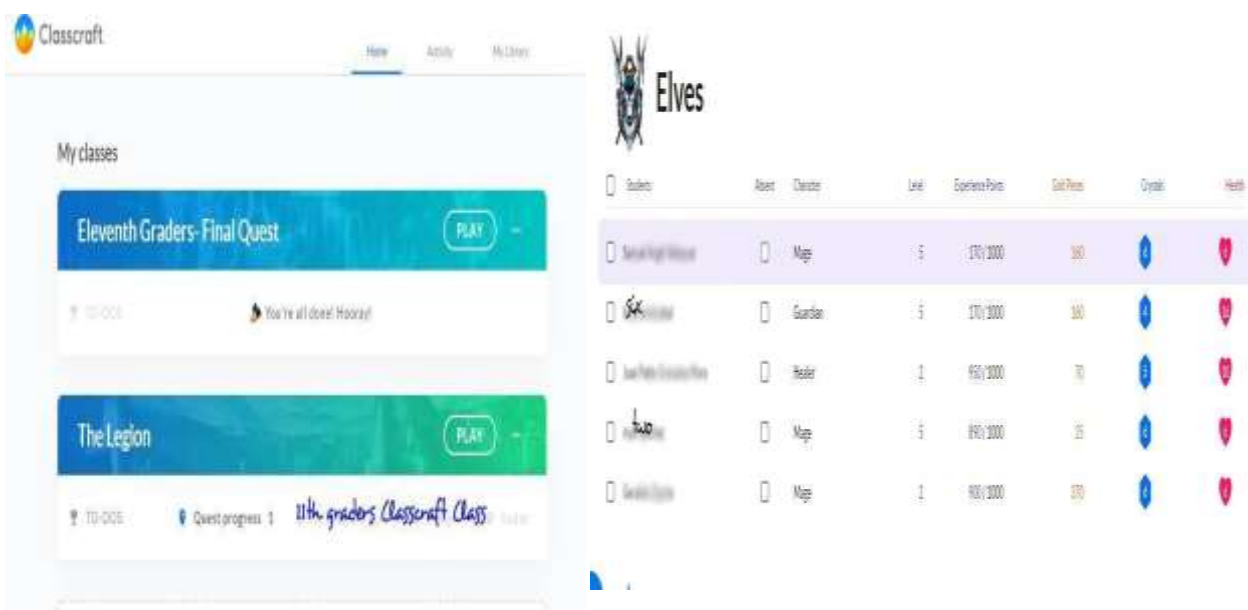


Figure 1. Classcraft platform with the 11<sup>th</sup> graders' class called *The Legion* (chosen by the students). One Guild scoring table with participants 6 and 2, their guild: *The Elves*. For more detail see appendix B.

**Gamification for L2 Test Preparation: B2 First Exam Preparation Using Integrated Tools within A Lesson Plan.** Keeping in mind that gamification is the use of game elements, game mechanics and game thinking in non-game contexts (Burke, 2014;

Kapp, 2012; Zichermann and Cunningham, 2011) and Gee’s (2013) learning principles from video games, I decided to implement the gamification tool without the reliance of a digital platform such as *Classcraft*, this, in order to understand other possible scenarios and outcomes where gamification takes place. Therefore, I conducted L2 test preparation strategy through specific activities related to gamification, where I implemented either other free digital platforms or pre-created *PowerPoint* activities. Before understanding gamification, L2 test practices were conducted through test and retest, but, with the gamification tool, these L2 test practices were displaced to the implementation of the platforms of *Kahoot* and *Quizizz*, as well as, the design of *English Olympic Games* where gamified activities such as jeopardy, Who Wants to Be Millionaire, Spelling Bee, Four Pictures One Word, and Spot the Differences took place, applying Gee’s (2013) learning gamification principles and only using relevant mechanics and elements of this tool. These last two activities were designed by the current gamer-teacher researcher and their main goals were: commemorate the Olympic Games held in 2021 Japan and, moreover, to strengthen previously visualized weaknesses related to L2 test preparation and L2 skills.

Keeping in mind the aforementioned needs helped me to visualize what gamification activities, elements and mechanics could be implemented in one lesson plan to foster students’ proficiency levels and better test preparation practices, through virtual platforms, without the need of a digital platform like *Classcraft*.

Table 4

*Gamification in Virtual Lessons through Gamified Activities*

<b>Activity</b>	<b>B2 First Test Preparation Section</b>	<b>Objective</b>	<b>Gamification Remarkable Elements and Dynamics</b>	<b>Description</b>

<b>Practice Use of English and Reading Comprehension activities from the test through Kahoot</b>	Use of English and Reading Comprehension	Practice word formation and open cloze exercises, as well as nurturing their L2 proficiency levels.	Points Leaderboard Challenge Individual Competition Rewards (grade) Feedback	Several L2 test parts were adapted into the <i>Kahoot</i> platform and practices of the test such as <i>wordformation</i> were performed through it.
<i>Quizziz</i>	Reading Comprehension	Comprehend details, cohesion, coherence and structures from given texts.	Teams' Leaderboard Points Team challenge and competition Reward Cooperation Social Graph	Test reading comprehension activities were adapted in a way that students had to respond the questions of short extracts individually to gain points for a team.
<i>English Olympic Games</i>	Use of English Reading Comprehension Speaking Listening Writing	The main goal of this activity was to improve students' skills on grammar, vocabulary, collocations usage, pronunciation, giving and identifying ideas and facts.	Chance Challenges Competition Cooperation Rewards Feedback Turns Leaderboards Win states Leaderboard Points Narrative	Like in the Olympic Games, different sports make part of it, thus, several activities with test content were adapted through Spelling Bee, Who Wants to Be Millionaire, jeopardy, four pictures one word and spot the differences activities.

These goals are integrated between the school curriculum and the examination requirements. Hence, I brought gamification into the virtual classroom in order to make

more inclusive, challenging and encouraging test preparation activities, not only for students to succeed in a certification exam, but, moreover, to have meaningful L2 learning processes that could be taken to real life scenarios.



Figure 2. The reading comprehension activity planned through the Quizziz platform and the jeopardy game from the English Olympic Games.

### Data Sources

In order to gather the data needed to answer my research question, I implemented five different methods that are frequently used in qualitative research: Observations, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, students ‘artifacts and the researcher’s diary (Lankshear & Knobel, 2004; Saldaña, 2011; Yin, 2011). In this section, I will respond the why and how of implementing these methods.

**Participant-observations:** This is a participant observation since, I, the researcher, located myself in the real-world setting being studied participating and observing (Yin, 2011). Observations, within this research, were addressed to watch the participants and their reactions towards their feelings, expressions, reactions, opinions and possible beliefs when dealing with three main hubs: test preparation, L2 proficiency levels and gamification



implementation. I schematized my observations by watching students in their commitment and engagement levels within the test preparation activities through virtual lessons.

Besides, observations schemes were focused in the gamification dynamics and mechanics. I recorded these observations using a combination of field notes and post facto notes deposited within my research journal. Moreover, I took notes, mainly on the classroom board and placed into pictures in my journal as evidence, about group focused interviews.

**Focused Groups Discussions:** I executed four group focused discussions after gamification activities took place. I want to make clear, as Yin (2011) points out, some of them were planned while some others were unplanned. Another good reason for conducting focused group discussions was because students, when in groups, express much more themselves rather than when they are placed as individuals (Yin, 2011). As Yin (2011) states, it was intended to surface the perspectives of the people in the group with a minimal influence of the researcher.

**Semi-structured interviews:** as Creswell (2016) explains, interviews with open-ended questions are characteristic of qualitative research since they can offer the researcher exhaustive information from the individuals. Besides, the open-ended questions have a wide range of types: personal interviews, focus groups, use of different sources such as cell phones or internet platforms which will facilitate the data collection of the study. For this study, data collection was made around virtual environments. Keeping in mind the main hub of this research, it was vital to gain understanding as to how participants perceived gamification for L2 test preparation, and how it could differ from traditional L2 test preparation methodologies.

Another main advantage of the semi-structured interviews is that they have an open framework that allows better two-way communication (Keller & Conradin, 2019).

**Students' artifacts:** as Lankshear & Knobel (2004) stated: "Artefacts are physical 'props' people use to get things done within the contexts of their daily lives" (page 235). my interest is to present how L2 test scoring behaves and L2 language proficiency levels. These artifacts intended to compare outcomes within a line of time, if there were better performances in terms of scoring within the L2 test activities. Artifacts are a fundamental instrument since it provides contextual details to the data available for the analysis.

**Research Diary:** As per Cassell & Symon (2004) explain, diaries in qualitative research help us to record, in context, reactions and feelings, specific behaviors, social interactions and events. In this research, I used a notebook where I recorded all possible descriptions, observations and reflections. The idea of this instrument was to foster the reflection towards what takes place in situ while conducting the research. As Plummer (1983) wrote: "*The diary is the document of life par excellence, chronicling as it does the immediately contemporaneous flow of public and private events that are significant to the diarist*".

A diary allowed me to gather ongoing information without being too obtrusive. The diary permitted me to obtain immediate information of the phenomena that was been studied while it occurred: students' reactions, emotions, behaviors, comments (in class and after class), suggestions and attitudes during the implementation of gamification and, as well, when it was not been implemented for further comparisons within the previously mentioned aspects.

**Data analysis: Categories**

The process to analyze my data was based on three main foundations: the conceptual framework, the analytic choices based on the sub-questions proposed within the current research (Saldaña, 2011) and similar studies discussed in the literature review. The three categories are formed to better answer my research question; they are organized in the following terms:

**L2 Test Students' Performances Within Gamification Strategies.** In this category, I included the outcomes in terms of students' performances within the L2 examinations; I made contrasts of their scoring before and after each practice so that I could possibly understand how worthwhile gamification could be in terms of achieving a better scoring result in L2 tests. This category was used for analyzing the teacher's journal, the students' artifacts, focused group discussions and the semi-structured interviews. This category wants to shed light on how practical gamification could be when it comes about fostering better results in L2 test practices. I included the lesson plan design and the way gamification was guided in lessons.

**Fostering Meaningful L2 Levels Through Gamification.** In this category, I analyzed how the English proficiency levels were affected with the implementation of gamification, the impact brought by gamification within L2 proficiency levels inside the macro and micro skills of the language. This category served to analyze the teacher's journal, focus group interviews, semi-structured interviews and students' artifacts.

**Gamification As a Tool for Fostering Better Virtual Lessons Practices.** In this category, I wanted to focus on how consequential, appealing and meaningful virtual lessons could be renovated. The current research seeks to find ways to foster virtual lessons into ameliorated learning and teaching practices, thus, it was important to comprehend how gamification could serve positively or negatively in the field of virtual lessons.

**Coding Within Categories.** To know my data better, I made up a chart in order to organize and register relevant data into each category. The criteria, for the chart categories, was based upon the data analysis categories that I developed to answer my research question and the discovery methods proposed by Saldaña (2011); *deduction, induction* and *abduction*. Furthermore, implemented colors to identify common patterns and organize emergent codes, too.



Figure 3. For the coding, data collected was properly transcribed into charts, organized into the data forms and dates.

### Ethics in Research

One of the main challenges in this research is to start moving from the phenomena of teaching English as something mechanical towards powerful lessons where; critical thinking becomes on main component of the curricula in English teaching processes (Nuguet & Catalano, 2015).

For this research, there are a set of principles to be followed. The first one is that even, if it is not expected to do good, doing any kind of harm is inadmissible. It is imperative minimizing the risk of any possible harm. Secondly, within this research everything will be performed with legally obtained consent from the institution and the participants as well. Thirdly, through this research, the identity of the participants will be protected under anonymity and confidentiality.

Furthermore, deceptive practices are banned since this research intends to foster meaningful L2 processes, any corrupt practice is disallowed. The social and cultural inequalities can be changed, but this must be done from all the context, starting from the research itself. Finally, as a professional and ethical person, impartial and right withdrawals will be held from the findings seen through this research.

### **My Role as A Researcher**

I began my Master's whirling around the idea of improving my teaching services. I have always loved teaching and, I think, it is not going to stop soon enough since as every single day that passes by, I love more and more learning and teaching because, through this way, I consider I have changed some realities towards a more humanistic path in a society and culture full on inequities, discrimination, racism, corruption and many more evils that can be deconstructed from the inside of the classroom. Ten years ago, I always wondered about my life purpose; there was always a certain monotony. But, when I started teaching, I found my life goal, light was made; when I teach, I do not purely think that I am working to get a payment but, I faithfully believe that I am giving my best efforts to positively change my pupils' lives.

Then, I came to realize that if you love what you do, you must do research on what you love, too; as Klehr (2012) mentioned, a teacher researcher can leverage both, the

students' learning and the teacher's own learning through, not only being in the field, but as well, when there is knowledge produced from the praxis of the profession. This combination between being a qualitative researcher, the passion for teaching, and the pursuing for social justice made me reflect that teaching is not only about students learning a language, but they understanding their realities and link them to a world that constantly transforms (Freire, P., & Macedo, D. 1983), one way to achieve this is through qualitative research. As Saldaña (2011) said, my role as researcher is to be a *person who devotes himself or herself to research*, but devotion in the light of service to others.

My role as a researcher is to find a way or to have a better understanding about everything that involves the foreign language teaching and try to improve this field through possible outcomes or proposals (Saldaña, 2018). Furthermore, teaching and research go hand to hand in the way that it is necessary to comprehend more of our field, so we, as teachers, can improve more and more the education through a more humanistic way (Fajardo, M. 2015).

### **Trustworthiness**

This is small-scale research that was carried out with professionalism and with a severe respect for my students. It does not represent a general population; therefore, its data analysis must be as faithful as possible so it becomes reliable. To reach validity and keeping in mind students' ages, participants read my findings and provided their reviews. As well, parents received a report about the gamification activities and students' artifacts implemented to foster L2 test preparation processes. Moreover, the main directives of the school received constant feedback on what was being done and, had constant contact with the lesson plans and their possible outcomes.

The students' activities and artifacts were socialized to parents, students and general educational community so that it provided more validity to what was being done in my L2 classes for test preparation. Artifacts and scoring results were not manipulated, they were kept authentic designed and applied material. Constant discussions and feedback of the current research was part of the class atmosphere so students could have clear insights of this study. Additionally, I used triangulation as an organizational strategy in the five data collection instruments to support my analysis.

### **Ethical Considerations**

As mentioned by Knobel (2003), while planning, designing and conducting an investigation project within cyberspace, it is crucial to, first, focus on the research context assuring the anonymity and privacy of the participants. Second, it is important to provide informed and willing participation from the participants with the respective support of their parents, not harming their identities at any cost. Furthermore, I made a personal commitment to follow the three maxims proposed by Knobel (2003): 1. Be informed 2. Be honest and open 3. Be prepared to invest in the moral compass of the current community.

## Chapter 4

### Gamification Experiences for L2 Test Preparation Towards Meaningful L2

#### Learning in virtual scenarios

In this chapter, I will present the significant findings that came from my data analysis. The study was held in a bilingual 11<sup>th</sup> grade classroom and its purpose was to explore the gamification experiences for L2 test preparation in virtual scenarios. I found three salient responses towards gamification based on my sub-questions: (a) Gamification as a tool to foster meaningful L2 test preparation processes, (b) Gamification to improve better virtual lessons practices and, (c) L2 meaningful and encouraging learning through gamification.

I include verbatim quotes from the data collection to support my findings. It is important to make clear that there was no need to translate the data from Spanish to English since classes and discussions always took place in the L2 language. As I used participant quotes and dialogues, I specified which data source they came from; I used the words *focus group* when the text came from the group discussions and *semi-structured interview* when the text came from the participants' interviews. As well, I used the word *journal* when the data came from my researcher's writings such as reflections, observations, ideas to keep in mind, outcomes, thoughts and so forth.

To answer the sub-questions and to describe the discoveries of this research, I use numbers, to refer to the students that participated in this study (Table 5). That this was actually a petition from the participants themselves.

#### *Table 5*

Eleventh Grade Students Participants



<b>Boys</b>	<b>Girls</b>
Two	One
Four	Three
Six	Five

## **L2 Test students' performances within gamification strategies**

After implementing gamification strategies for fostering L2 test preparation developments and analyzing the collected data, several patterns came up concerning gamification and L2 test preparation; first, I will discuss what gamification mechanics, elements and dynamics truly impacted students and how that influence took place. Furthermore, I would like to make a contrast between students' experiences when implementing gamification within *Classcraft* to when implementing gamification through in situ virtual guided activities, how they differ and the role that the teacher played. As regards to its efficiency within the examination scoring, I will make a contrast between two *B2 First* simulation exams that students performed, this in order to possibly understand its efficacy in terms of scoring.

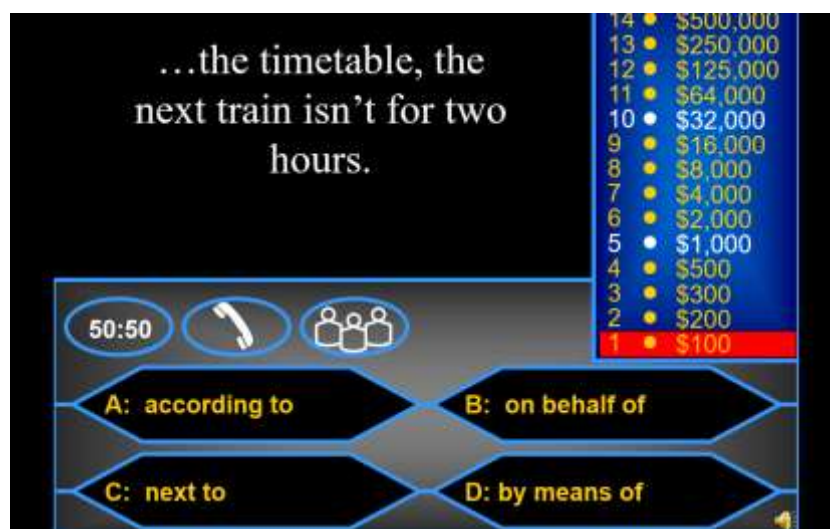
**Gamification mechanics, elements and dynamics and effective L2 test preparation.** After applying the gamification strategy for L2 test preparation, it was imperative to understand what gamification mechanics, elements and dynamics certainly functioned and the learning principles that truly impacted students. One learning principle that constantly emerged as a powerful tool was feedback. As Zichermann and Cunningham (2011) stated, feedback is the growing cornerstone of gamification since it sheds light on

learners to the “right” direction for achieving better levels and scores. Concerning this, within the semi-structured interview, Four stated:

I felt the change is more like more meaningful because is like learning by a game. Because I like to have immediate feedback as an example again, because I am like very open minded and I do recall everything. So, I need like, immediate feedback to check my mistakes in this case, and that's the one that helped me a lot. (Semi-structured interview, November 18<sup>th</sup>-2021)

Providing students immediate feedback permits students to have a better understanding of what they are doing and how it should be done, it allows better memory retention advances for better L2 test performances. When implementing the *English Olympic Games*, I registered in my journal:

Students went over advanced grammar exercises and, despite that, they were still encouraged to work. Students enjoyed a lot more these activities, and, providing feedback, permitted much more meaningful L2 learning processes. (Teacher’s journal, September 15<sup>th</sup>- 2021)



*Figure 4.* Who Wants to Be Millionaire adapted to *B2 First* exam questions. This gamified activity was used during the English Olympic Games.

Gee (2003) stated that, in schools, students do not get enough challenge for their school-based mastery. Challenge, raises as a second fundamental principle, not only for improving L2 test preparation processes but to engage students into learning. It is lighting a spark for students to become more curious, to bring education as an act of enjoyment, to succeed. Respecting this, Five and One respectively mentioned:

I felt everything, but not bored. I feel challenged, because you know, my classmates are have a really good English level. So I think it's what I said later, we all wanted to win, because we all want to have a good grade on the on the test.

Also, it was fun knowing that is the last year and in competing with them. It's like, it makes me happy. (Five, Semi-structured interview, November 18<sup>th</sup>-2021)

It is motivating, I felt challenged and there are better memory processes. I think it helps me to remember more things about the exam tips and vocabulary for example. (One, Focus Group 3-November 4<sup>th</sup>-2021)

When implementing the *English Olympic Games*, it was particularly easy to envision how gamification learning principles usually interplayed to favor students' L2 test preparation offering significant L2 practices, too. Gamification learning principles from video games engaged students into a more exciting, personalized, interactive learning and performance, I registered in my journal:

Within the execution of the second lessons plan, I could see Gee's (2013) learning principles such as:

- Identity: students could choose their names. This gave them some sort of empowerment since, every time they hit a right or wrong answer, they used to yell the team's name and not theirs.
- Interaction: there was constant interaction among teacher, students and gamified activities. In spite of the competition, students used to help classmates from other teams, interaction was everywhere.
- Risk Taking: There was lower risk for failure so this fostered students' participation. Thus, participation increased considerably.
- Customized: This activity was adapted to prepare students for L2 test taking, thus, it provided significant moments towards understanding the complexities of the examination.
- Agency: somehow, students had control on their participation, turns, topics and game choices. This gave them a sense of appropriation; they felt the center of the class.
- Well-ordered problems: problems led to another one while slowly, but, effectively, increasing the L2 difficulty level. This permitted students with "low-proficiency" levels to participate, even, with complex L2 exercises.
- Challenge and consideration: the expertise level for this activity suits into students' proficiency L2 levels, and proposed gamified activities brought excitement and involvement through challenge.
- Just in Time: Students are culminating their L2 test preparation process, they are tired and this activity came like a savior, right on time, to provide motivation and awareness and, it did it. (Teacher's Journal-September 15<sup>th</sup> -2021)

As well, other gamification elements such as scoring, cooperative work, rewards and competition, proved to be essential to foster students' L2 processes within the proposed activities. As I reflected in my journal,

Traditional L2 test preparation feels too individual; the atmosphere is quite (no in a good way) because I'm used to listening to students speaking and providing many opinions and even suggestions. And, through this activity, students are more focused on the scoring rather than knowing the right answers and understanding them. (Teacher's Journal-October 6<sup>th</sup>-2021)

Students don't feel alone but working in a cooperative way, like an on-line video game, and, mainly if the teacher is involved. I played *Kahoot* and *Quizziz* with them, I felt students were challenged and excited about it. (November 4<sup>th</sup>-2021/teacher's journal)

Nevertheless, one important conclusion is that using many of the gamification elements at once could be overwhelming for students, mainly, for those considered non-gamers. One experience I had regarding this situation took place with *Classcraft*; even if I explained each component, provided tutorials and did on-time exercises, some students felt dazed by the many features the platform offered, and, as a consequence, few students did not continue using the platform, they carried on with *Google Classroom*. It is to remark that this phenomenon happened with non-gamers, thus, it may lead to imply that the gamer experience is important when using this kind of platform. This can be dilucidated when

Three says:

“Mmmm...I mean it, I loved *Classcraft*, but the thing that I didn't like is that we didn't know like how to use it. And we didn't get used to it. So bad *Kahoot* was

more dynamic, more like, fast and all that stuff. So, basically, so it's that, Classcraft is more complex”

***Classcraft vs In-situ Virtual Guided Gamified Activities.*** As I explained in chapter 3, due to the shift from total virtual lessons (five days a week) to alternating schedules (two days a week) that took place in the educational institution, students, most of them, stopped using *Classcraft*. This is important to analyze since *Classcraft* presented another limitation: not all students were able to access to the platform at school since there was not a public wi-fi red and, not all students had devices to access it, some had to wait until arriving their houses for using it and performing the activities within there or getting their feedback. This demotivated some students; the lesson plan executed for L2 test preparation was greatly performed, nevertheless, its continual use strongly diminished due to the *Alternancia* project. Nonetheless, I still had two days of virtual lessons with students, thus, keeping in mind the read literature, I decided to remain using gamification through other means such as *Kahoot*, *Quizizz* and own designed material, avoiding long-term or mid-term activities.

These “impasses” proved to be quite valuable since it permitted me to understand, in the first place, that students preferred short-term gamified activities and, it shed light on the importance of the role of the teacher when implementing gamification for L2 developments. Regarding this, Four and Six, correspondingly, state:

“It is not that continuous; you don’t have a teacher to ask you if you are ok. There are not that interactive or interface. Like the other activities like Who Wants to Be Millionaire or spelling bee, it was like more entertaining, playing those games than trying to do that, in the Classcraft activities I was like, where is my team? While

the others, in situ, I was with them, in the class, I can talk to them, cooperative not like in Classcraft” (semi-structured interview, November 18<sup>th</sup>-2021)

“I think it was better *Kahoot* and *Quizziz* and kind of stuff. Because the platform class crowds, it was a good idea. But maybe it's not like the best platform to do it. Because it doesn't have too much engagement. I see I saw it like, it could be a good begin the classroom stuff. But to deploy activities and do activities in there, I think it's better Kahoot and Quizziz. that give you like, the feedback later on, when you finish, like your test, or whatever you're doing. And, in Classcraft, it's like, it's like a mixture of classroom and, and, like, it's with gamification, instead of like, questions, and you have like 10 seconds, 20 seconds to answer. And if you don't answer it at this point. That's like more attractive. That aspect, and I think it's that aspect”. (semi-structured interview, November 18<sup>th</sup>-2021)

**The Role of The Teacher in Implementing Gamification.** As gamification continued to happen in the L2 lessons, I started to comprehend the importance of the role that the teacher plays in order for gamification to be effectively implemented or the relevant teacher’s features for gamification to flourish. I began to identify some fundamental characteristics through its implementation, like: (a) having an excellent relationship with the students, (b) encouraging students, (c) knowing students in-depth, (d) loving what is being done and, (e) granting an enjoyable narrative. It is important to remark that, as Two expressed, not having these characteristics may result in generating contrary effects from the desired ones. About this, Two and Five gave an important insight within the semi-structured interview:

Two: It's most about what gamification is, because if, let's say this teacher that doesn't have a very doesn't have a very good relationship with the students. And he

doesn't enjoy and he doesn't enjoy his job or stuff like that, then students will normally say, I don't want to do this. I don't feel like doing it actually. And they just give up and they decide to not even get started. And that's another problem actually for gamification. If students don't have the motivation, the motivation to actually start or get involved with the process. As it will never start. The teacher can encourage the students in order to start playing. If you can't encourage the students to start playing. It would end up like one of the teachers that once tried to do this, but nobody wanted to participate. (semi-structured interview, November 18<sup>th</sup>-2021)

Well, yes, but maybe, I mean, you have qualities that makes you do better when applying gamification that other teachers don't have. Maybe like, you have a good communication with the students. Um, you do have fun speaking. So, it makes you interesting, it makes you want to learn. (semi-structured interview, November 18<sup>th</sup>-2021)

**Contrast Between Two B2 First Simulation Exams.** In this section, I provide information about how efficient gamification could be in terms of students' performances in L2 tests. These exams took place as part of institutional/school dynamics and one exam was applied on August 25<sup>th</sup> while the other one was applied on November 17<sup>th</sup>. I have the consent form from the school and the participants to display the mentioned results. This exam took 3 hours 43 minutes to be completed, it has four reading comprehension exercises with 30 questions. Besides, it has 3 exercises of use of English with 22 questions, 4 listening exercises with 30 questions, writing composition has 2 parts, and a final interview with 4 parts where individual and group responses are evaluated.

*Table 6*



Contrast between 2 *B2 First* Exams and The Impact of Gamification within The  
Candidates' Performance

<b>Participant</b>	<b>B2 First Exam in August 25<sup>th</sup> score</b>	<b>B2 First exam applied in November 17<sup>th</sup> score</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>One</b>	66% B2 level	69% B2 Level	In terms of the exam, the participant showed an improvement.
<b>Two</b>	68% B2 level	83% C1 level	Within the second exam, participant Two greatly improved the score of the test.
<b>Three</b>	73% B2 level	81% C1 Level	Within the second exam, participant Three greatly improved the score of the test.
<b>Four</b>	82% C1 level	82% C1 level	Four kept its performance within the exam.
<b>Five</b>	70% B2 level	70% B2 level	Five kept its performance within the exam. It is important to clarify that participant 5 did not do one part of the exam because the time ran over.
<b>Six</b>	75% B2 level	82% C1 level	Within the second exam, participant Six greatly improved the score of the test.

In relation to practicality, gamification proved to foster better scores within four of six participants, but, it is chief to make clear; none of the participants got worse scores, they either remained the same or showed improvement. Nonetheless, candidate Four kept the

achievement level within the exam, which is hard keeping in mind the examination. It is important to remark that candidates, within this examination *B2 First*, are expected to achieve a B2 level, the same one that the institution intends to achieve with the eleventh graders, nevertheless, four participants went beyond and achieve C1 levels, much more than is being demanded.

### **Fostering meaningful L2 Levels through gamification.**

Gamification was a strategy that not only sought fostering better L2 test preparation progressions but, as well, it intended to provide L2 meaningful practices rather than just providing students strategies to succeed in an examination. In terms of L2 meaningful learning, I will talk over some important factors that strongly boosted L2 learning through gamification. Besides, I will make a contrast between L2 test traditional preparation methods vs gamification strategies for test L2 preparation, this, keeping in mind that participants went over drilling, test and re-test practices over 2020 for the *B2 First exam*, when I was their teacher in tenth grade before discovering gamification. as well, I will bring notions about the social and cultural impact gamification brought to my class.

**Gamification Is an Important Factor That Strongly Influenced the Mastering of the Target Language.** When I started lessons with the current class, students had good proficiency levels, but there was still the concern that students needed to deepen within the language macro and micro abilities so that they could be able to take this *B2 First* with the minimum requirements of the language. Thus, one question must be responded: in what ways did gamification affect the L2 progressions?

While implementing gamification for L2 test preparation, participants started to give the answers about this, One's observation about this in our third focus group,

“It is motivating, I felt challenged and there are better memory processes. I think it helps me to remember more things about the exam tips and vocabulary for example...”

(Focus Group 3, November 4<sup>th</sup>-2021)

From this quote, one can observe how gamification fosters improved L2 memory advances. Of course, memory is linked to students’ emotions and experiences when the strategy took place, thus, the better memory processes happened because students went over emotions like feeling challenged, competence, cooperative work and, the failure value was not that frustrating as it happens with traditional tasks. About this, when implementing the English Olympic Games, I realized that students’ L2 macro and micro skills were better than they used to be, for this, I registered within the observation of the English Olympic Games:

As well, students are applying advanced grammar structures into their speech, their pronunciation is better as well as their fluency. Their vocabulary range is far ample since they use words like: “in situ” “overwhelmed” “craze” “lorry” even ones mainly of the British register. *Who Wants to Be Millionaire* has quite complex questions, and they, as a group provided the answers to those questions.

(September 15<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup>-Observation 6)

In addition, gamification became a powerful engine for students to feel motivated to learn inside the L2 classes. It created an atmosphere of joy, challenge and cooperative learning. While dealing with gamified activities from *Kahoot* and *Quizziz* games, students not only wanted to provide the right answers but as well wanted to comprehend the why about the answers. This is taking L2 learning to other scenarios where students are not just empty vessels to fill with specific information but students that, willingly, want to learn and understand what is being done. It is important to remark that, even if there was a

competitive environment, students tried to support each other no matter if they did not belong to their teams or it meant to lose points for their teams. It was like cooperating for the sake of good learning and not just to win a game. About this, it is to highlight the case of 4, who, at the beginning of the lessons did not participate a lot in classes and was a very shy person. At a later stage of gamification implemented in L2 lessons, Four was considered an L2 leader in the classroom, students used to talk to him about the errors and responses regarding the English language. It is interesting to mention that Four and One are English teachers currently, they work on personalized English classes, mostly, to college students. with regard to previously mentioned ideas, Four mentioned two main ideas within the semi-structured interview:

I think I improved a lot English, before, I did not like much the idea, I'm very shy, but when I started, like, I have improved in everything, I feel much better with what I have done, now I think I have a better understanding like in essays, a lot of things like that (Semi-structured Interview-November 18<sup>th</sup>-2021)

You know that I teach English classes and I apply in activities like debates. (Semi-structured Interview-November 18<sup>th</sup>-2021)

In contrast to the prior situation, Two gave a relevant insight about the pressure or stress factor. Competitiveness brings a sort of pressure on students and it is imperative to find strategies to handle stress on students when implementing gamification. Students, throughout gamification activities, developed a sense of competitiveness, a sense of challenge, and a strong commitment to understand the why about things but, it led to stress factors within some students as Two expresses in the semi-structured interview:

This, like I already said it, it doesn't teach you how to deal with stress, it only takes stress away from you. Like, you can go through topics faster. Instead of going

through one topic, every two days, you can review a top you can review one topic in one day. Or you can make instead of during the test, you can see what other people know, with all five other topics in that one thing I like, suggestions. That's a hard one. From first suggestion is to gamification, I would say that you would want to look for it instead of making it look good, or you should look for the entries. You should look for what students would want to enter games, which, really, it's the wrist for that competitiveness or the challenges.



Figure 5. Quests created towards L2 test preparation in virtual lessons. Here, there are four quests, each one had different exercises linked to *Google Forms* exams.



Figure 6. The sub-quests students had to face for L2 test preparation in the Classcraft platform.

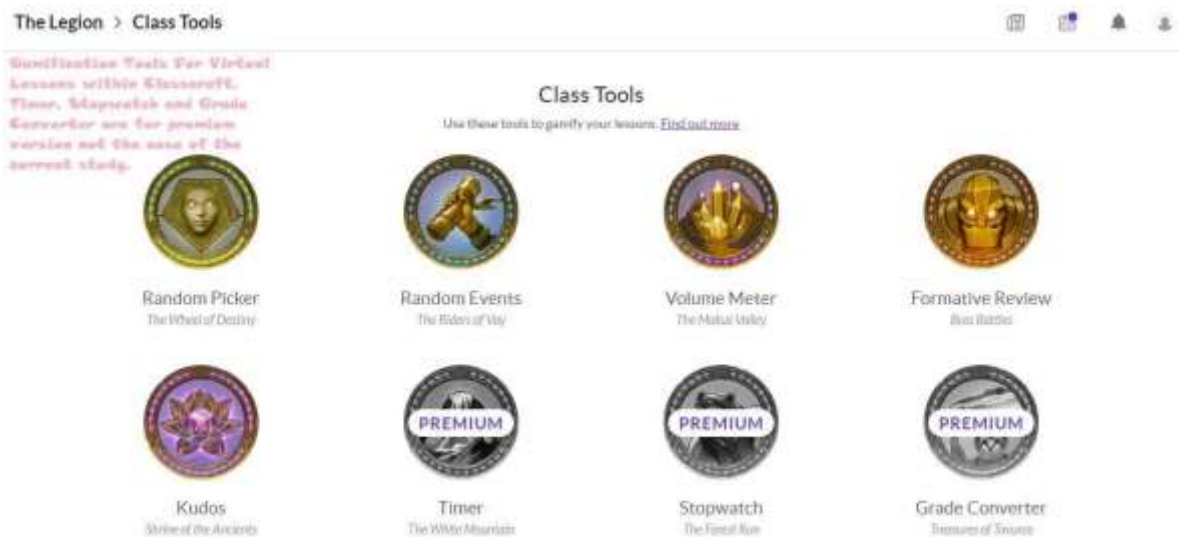


Figure 7. Classcraft tools. Students could go over *Random Picker*, *Random Events*, and *Formative Review* (boss fights). *Kudos* was the space for writing through given instructions. *Volume Meter* is a characteristic I never used; it is to define the level of noise in virtual lessons. *Timer*, *Stopwatch* and *Grade Converter* were premium features that I never found necessary to use.

Later, it is vital to bring into the discussion the role of failure in L2 learning through gamification. One of the main issues with the current educational system is that failure, while performing activities in school, has a high cost; students do not get many chances to re-do or re-try activities until mastery. Gamification activities, on the other hand, wanted to provide as many opportunities as students needed so they could achieve mastery without a bad grade penalty. It was essential to provide students opportunities, as many as they needed. Nevertheless, One and Six did not consider the unlimited chances as something positive, thus, this could provide ideas for possible research to understand the role of opportunity within gamification. As to having many chances until reaching L2 mastery Two, Three, One and Six stated accordingly in a focus group discussion:

Chances are a controversial factor, but I see it like a rehearsal for a final boss

(Focus Group 4, November 11<sup>th</sup>-2021)

Chances are good Because of the B2 First design becomes much more appealing.

(Focus Group 4, November 11<sup>th</sup>-2021)

Chances are good but they must be limited. (Focus Group 4, November 11<sup>th</sup>-2021)

There must be several options but not unlimited chances. (Focus Group 4,  
November 11<sup>th</sup>-2021)

**Gamification vs traditional L2 practices.** Before implementing gamification, as it was stated in chapter 2 and 3, students were going over “traditional” L2 practices. Hence, it was important to understand how different students perceived those traditional strategies vs the gamification strategies within the English language for L2 test preparation. This pattern gave important outcomes in the way that gamification conveyed challenging, attention, awareness for meaningful learning that were not present before gamification to happen, in

this way, fostering meaningfully the students' commitment towards L2 learning. As to this contrast, in one focus group discussion, Six, Four and Five respectively stated:

When there is a challenge factor, students try harder on achieving, we don't like losing. (Focus Group 4, November 11<sup>th</sup> -2021)

People become more aware of what is happening. Not always the same thing (Focus Group 4, November 11<sup>th</sup> -2021)

It affects me in a good way. Because I think actually, that I learned more when, when you're playing gamification in classes. Because I'm, like, purposed to do something in class and I want to do it, and I'm, and I'm happy to do it. Like a weight. I'm not sleepy or something. So, I like paying more attention to it. And also, when we've oversized me, we're all like trying to win the game. So, it's like a competition, and it's more fun. Okay, good.” (Semi-structured interview, November 18<sup>th</sup>)



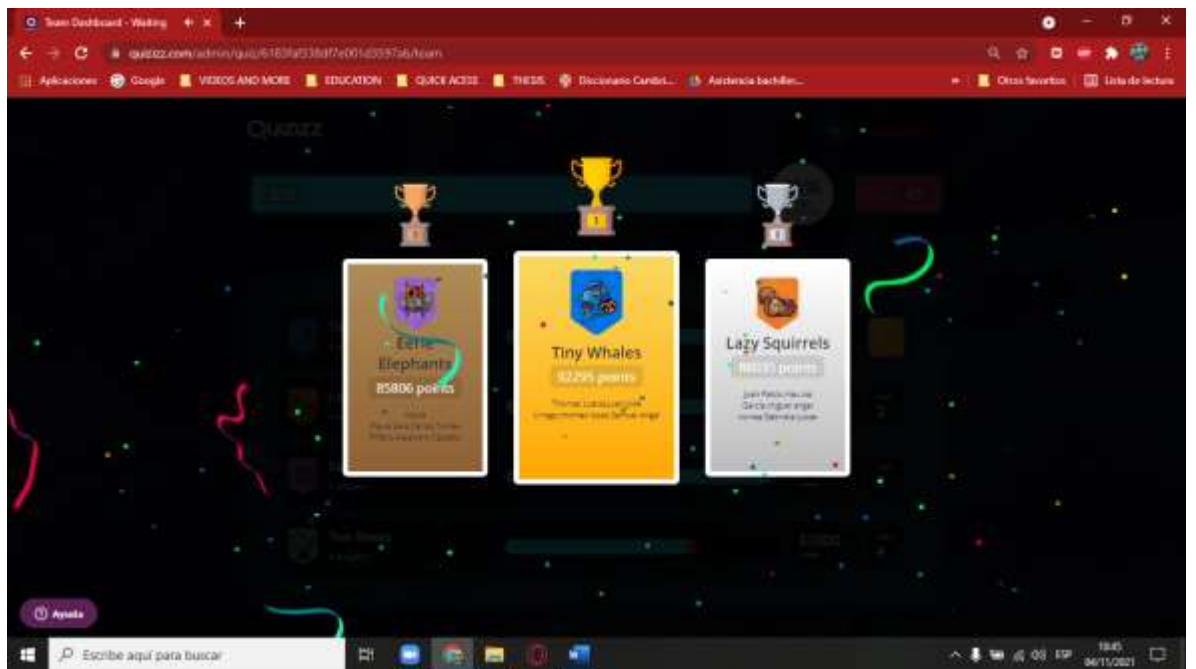
Figure 8. Quizziz activity for the reading comprehension L2 test preparation.

Students compete in groups from individual performances.





Figure 9. Leading Kahoot and Quizziz gamified activities through the virtual lessons. Students, whose turn is not, participate providing ideas, solutions or even expressing their feeling via chat.



*Figure 10. Quizizz reading comprehension activity for L2 test preparation. Tiny Whales were the winners.*

**Heard voices through gamification in L2 learning scenarios.** While implementing gamification within the virtual classes, students started to participate more often and, besides, started to provide ideas, opinions and suggestions about the activities being realized by their own. One important outcome about implementing gamification is that we need to open spaces to hear students' opinions, suggestions and possible ideas about what is being done in the class, to bring democratic developments into learning states.

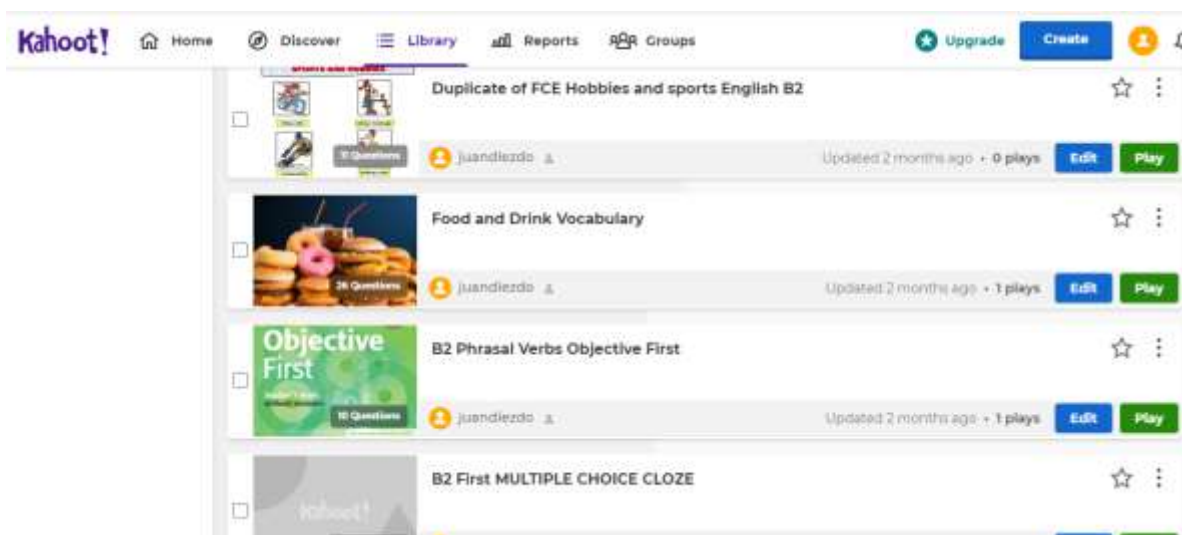
When implementing the *Kahoot* and *Quizizz* gamified activities, students expressed that they did not feel the joy or motivation in other subjects as they were doing through in L2 gamified lessons. Learning is not easy but it must provide enjoyment, students must know that they are the center of the classroom and not the teacher. Gamification in L2 learning was about this, about creating an L2 learning environment where students are the center of the class, creating opportunities to hear their voices, needs, frustrations, feelings and forth. This not only happened within this activity, even after other gamified classes, students used to come to me to talk about the classes or the way they performed within them providing me with better notions to foster my L2 teaching practices. Among those heard voices One and Six expressed:

The difference is that in gamification you feel challenged and in traditional way you are just doing things teacher tells you (Focus Group 3, November 4<sup>th</sup>-2021). gamification, prefer more didactical things than just simple work. worksheets, quizzes and so forth. one great way to attract anyone to the education. (Focus Group 3, November 4<sup>th</sup>-2021).

besides, from vivid experiences in gamified L2 classes, after activities occurred, I reflected in my journal:

The atmosphere of the virtual class totally changed; for the first time, students had all their microphones and cameras on. They were yelling, laughing, playing jokes, too. At the end, I asked students about their feelings within today's class: I felt students between sad and happy, sad because they seemed to really miss school and happy because, as one of them expressed: "I feel back in school again" this last idea struck me like a lightning bolt, I mean, these are hard times and students need to be heard and, moreover, that we seek new strategies where they become the center of education providing true education and not just attending a lesson because it is our labor duty. (Teacher's journal, April 30<sup>th</sup>-2021)

they trust me, they even tell me quite delicate things that no one would like to hear but situations that cannot be unattended, I mean, I feel students see me like a reference, a person to trust, a person with experiences that can teach them about real-life situations and not just about specific learning. (Teacher's journal-August 3<sup>rd</sup>-2021)



*Figure 11.* Designed *Kahoot* activities in the teacher's account to bring gamification for L2 test preparation in virtual lessons. B2 First exam parts adapted to the platform.

### **Gamification as a tool for fostering better virtual lessons practices**

As to what it implies about gamification and its impact through L2 virtual lessons, it is important, in the first place, students' prior experiences within the virtual lessons; their conceptions about them and the aspects that demanded to be improved. From a group focus discussion, students expressed their feelings and points of view about the virtual lessons, hence, several outcomes came up to understand why the digital environment may not be affording appealing and engaging L2 lessons. Afterwards, from the collected data, I will discuss the impact gamification brought for L2 virtual lessons.

**A description of students' prior experiences with virtual lessons before the implementation of gamification.** Before digging into the ways participants responded to gamification for L2 test preparation in virtual contexts, it is important to understand how their virtual lessons experiences were like before going over this course. Within an early stage of the current study, I had a focus group discussion about virtual lessons and their consequences in today's world, this discussion, my teacher-researcher experiences and the observations made throughout the research, allowed me to construct the narrative about this.

As previously declared, and, as stated in chapter 1 through the statement of the problem, on key concern was to know why students were not actively participating within the virtual lessons, their perceptions about the virtual classes. Thus, keeping in mind this necessity, I opened a space in April 30<sup>th</sup>-2021 for our first group focus conversation about virtual lessons. This conversation gave important views to start understanding why virtual lessons were not being efficient and interesting. Among the conclusions, students perceived

the virtual environment as another space for more traditional teaching without the human touch quality. Linked to this, Six and Three stated:

Step by step, virtual education grows, but, traditional education continues to happen when is far easier to apply many virtual tools than any other time of the education history. (Group focus 1- April 30<sup>th</sup>-2021).

We don't learn the same way, it lacks human quality, how to get out of the screen?

In spite of this is the generation of video games and virtuality. It is linked to a personal commitment rather than the teacher's duty. (Group focus 1- April 30<sup>th</sup>-2021)

Traditional classes were merely displaced from a vis-à-vis educational context to a virtual space keeping the same traditional teaching practices. About this, One remarked:

In virtuality, we have the same education than the one received in the school. I invite the educational system to change; how could be a robot be different from a teacher? Dubai has robots teaching classes now. (Group focus 1- April 30<sup>th</sup>-2021)

**Gamification For Better Practices in English Virtual Lessons.** One first experience I truly had with gamification in the classroom took place on April 30<sup>th</sup>/2021 where I implemented a *Kahoot* activity for reviewing vocabulary for *Household Chores*. By then, as a teacher-researcher, I was still looking for solid ideas, not only for my research project in the master's thesis but, moreover, to improve virtual L2 practices, I felt like I owed it to my students. This day, after implementing the gamified activity students totally changed their attitude towards the class, as I wrote in one observation:

Recently, I came across an application named Kahoot, which I used for the first time within a Webinar. Thus, I decided to implement it to review vocabulary about Household Chores. Students' reaction towards this activity was outstanding; they

started to speak more, even; some students were asking for more activities like this. After the activity, students gave some ideas written in the journal as focus group. Interpretation: students may like games in virtual classes so it becomes more interactive. They loved cooperative work and challenge.

After reading literature about gamification, I designed the aforementioned lesson plans to possibly foster better practices within the virtual environments and perhaps understand what elements truly could benefit virtual environments for better teaching practices by then. One first conclusion is that, after implementing gamified strategies in L2 virtual spaces, students greatly improved their participation, engagement, commitment and interaction in the class. Gamification in virtual lessons offered a set of essential features for succeeding within the teaching practices: cooperative and collaborative work, challenge, immediate feedback, chance and competition. These aspects triggered enormously the English practices in virtual spaces. As registered in one observation when implementing *Kahoot* for B2 First multiple-choice cloze exercises, students totally change their mindset when gamification happens in the virtual classes:

I retook the gamification processes after the disruption presented by Classcraft. I started with *Kahoot* playing B2 First Open-cloze exercises. Students, different from the “standard lessons”, were asking about the why and how of each exercise. They almost never turn their cameras on, but today they did it. I saw the thrilled by the exercises, challenged, motivated and, furthermore, engaged. Getting this through virtual lessons is hard, and mostly, to make them participate. This gave an idea about not depending on platform such as Classcraft but creating gamification activities through an integral process providing guidance, in situ, by the teacher.

(Participant-observation 5, August 26<sup>th</sup>-2021)

As well, virtual classes were fostered by allowing all class to participate collectively, cooperating each other through carefully designed interactive material and, while perceiving the many options platforms can offer to us teachers, gamification is not only about using gamified platforms in virtual lessons, it is also about applying the gamification learning principles to foster practices that would not succeed otherwise. I registered this within my last participant-observation:

While I was guiding the activity, something came up to my mind: why not allowing students to send me responses via private chat even if it is not my turn? this fostered a lot students' participation within the virtual environment. It was like a boost in the class, not only allowing some students to participate but, in private, to provide their ideas, answers and opinions. This kept all the class engaged and not only the students whose turn was it. (Participant-observation, November 4<sup>th</sup>-2021)

Gamification proved to have a huge helpful impact on students, in their motivation, feelings, attitudes and performances within the virtual scenarios. It was essential to foster better practices in spaces that remain unexplored or where we lack experience for meaningful progression in education. As Four and Six indicated:

Yes, I think that using gamification in my case help me to concentrate more in the class and pay more attention to the topics we work. (Group Focus 3-November 4<sup>th</sup>) the work becomes less boring, more attractive to students. and the connection between the students I think, becomes more comfortable. Gamification, prefer more didactical things than just simple work. worksheets, quizzes and so forth. one great way to attract anyone to the education. (Group Focus 3-November 4<sup>th</sup>)

**Gamification in B2 First Test Preparation with 11<sup>o</sup>B students-November  
04<sup>th</sup>**

The Radiant	Doom Matter Immortals	Ride or Die	The Useless	
████████	████████	████████	Four	
████████	████████	████████	One	
████████	████████	Five	One	
████████	████████	████████	████████	
████████	Two	Three	████████	
████████	Six			
████████	████████			
<b>Team's name</b>	<b>Jeopardy</b>	<b>Kahoot</b>	<b>Quizziz</b>	<b>Final Score</b>
The Radiant	1100	1400	1800	<b>4300 (second place)</b>
Doom Matter Immortals	1400	1300	1900	<b>4600 (first place)</b>
Ride or Die	1200	1000	1700	<b>3900 (third place)</b>
The Useless	700	1600	2000	<b>4300 (second place)</b>

Figure 12. Scoring table done via Word to register students' points at each one of the activities. Participants Two and Six within the winning team.

Importing gamification as a tool to foster better L2 test preparation processes facing meaningful English learning practices, in virtual spaces, proved to be quite valuable; students have better progressions of their English language performances, and, furthermore, they mastered better and suitable strategies for them to succeed within a certification exam like it is the *B2 First*: students perceive this exam like the final boss not just like another obligation from high school. They are eager, optimistic and prepared, gamification developed in them autonomy for learning and for understanding more the complexities of the language and learning, not only in English, but in other subjects.



## **Chapter Five**

### **A Discussion on L2 Test Preparation towards Meaningful English Practices in Virtual Spaces in Response to Gamification**

In this study, I committed myself to explore how gamification could foster students' practices for L2 tests and, moreover, how it could bring improved experiences not just for fostering processes of the English language but within virtual spaces. This study sought to take students out of traditional scenarios of the L2 language in virtual spaces; boost motivation, provide engagement, enjoyment and challenging education moored to students' current realities. I implemented gamification and collected data through semi-structured interviews, participant-observations, teacher's journal, students' artifacts and focus group discussions.

In this chapter, I answer my research question by discussing the findings and properly linking them to the prior studies. For the previously mentioned idea, I divided the discussion into the sub-questions that oriented the current research. Then, I will present the implications that gamification places regarding L2 test preparation. Likewise, I reveal the study's limitations and point out directions for future research.

#### **Answering the research question: The Application of Gamification for Fostering Significant English Test Practices towards Meaningful Processes of the L2 Language in Virtual Spaces**

This study explored how teenage ELS experienced and responded to gamification in terms of: (1) better L2 test preparation processes, (2) meaningful learning of the language and, (3) improved teaching practices in virtual scenarios. Through the analysis of the collected data, I discovered that 11<sup>th</sup> graders responded better in terms of L2 test performance and scoring through gamified activities. Furthermore, I found that L2 test

preparation, through gamification, brings positive outcomes in terms of L2 learning within virtual spaces. Following, I answer my research question by discussing how participants responded to gamification, essentially creating spaces for them to become critical L2 learners.

### ***Gamification As A Strategy For Better L2 Test Preparations Processes***

The data revealed that students developed better L2 test progressions in response to gamification activities in virtual spaces; gamification elements, mechanics and learning principles such as immediate feedback, the challenge factor, competitiveness influence, identity empowerment, rewards, cooperative and collaborative interaction, customization of activities inside the students' real needs, agency, well-order situations by L2 levels, and contextualized activities bring positive results when it is about preparing students for L2 tests. At a late stage of gamification for L2 test preparation, students were obtaining better approaches for having valuable performances in L2 test simulations in terms of scoring and dealing with complex structures of L2 language. With regards to scoring, participants presented significant improvements, while 4 kept the same scores; as clarified in chapter 4, keeping the same scores as it happened with 4 is still an excellent accomplishment since 4 remained in the C1 level which goes beyond of what is being demanded students to accomplish. Only candidate 5 kept the same performance in the *B2 First* simulation but accomplished the level required to 11<sup>th</sup> graders.

In conjunction with the digital platform *Classcraft* and the *in situ* virtual gamified guided activities implementation, both proved to be essential for bringing improved progressions in English lessons for L2 test preparation in virtual environments. Nevertheless, *Classcraft* evidenced two main issues: (1) if students are not used to dealing with gamification elements, it may become overwhelming and students' performances will

not be as good as expected and, (2) it works gracefully when students have 100% virtual lessons. For the alternated lessons, it showed issues of connectivity and perpetual use from the students' side since they preferred in situ guided virtual gamified activities. Students preferred, by far, gamified activities *in situ*, as Gee (2003) expressed "in demand".

My study supports what previous studies found about gamification for innovate setups in L2 contexts. As Burke, (2014), Gee (2003), and Tenório, Reinaldo, de Góis, & Lopes (2017) expressed, gamification sought students to find similar challenges, commitment, team work, seen in games and video games into learning and teaching practices without diverting from the pedagogical goals, in this case, the L2 examination and curriculum goals. As Sheldon (2012) points out, for gamification to prosper it is vital to have flexible curricula, anyhow, in spite of not having this in favor, gamification proved to be useful even in the study plan is rigid like the one of this study.

My study showed that students use the gamification learning principles for succeeding with L2 test preparation contexts, but, moreover, students informed that they continued to apply them for English meaningful learning and, even, indoors other subjects apart from the English class. Video games learning principles could be brought to academic frameworks and provided challenge and L2 learning through entertaining virtual school situations (Gee, 2003). As a final point, comparing Vargas-Macías, Rodríguez-Hernández, & Sánchez-Saenz (2020) study, gamification resulted in more motivated, satisfied and trained students in L2 test preparation scenarios.

### ***Meaningful English Learning Through Gamification***

Regarding this category, the data demonstrated that better English proficiency levels can be reached through gamification for L2 test preparation. Amid the important factors that strongly influenced English language learning, gamification brought key features to my

lessons that allowed better English proficiency levels, these factors, fundamental for any learning, were: motivation, challenge, better memory processes married to students' emotions and experiences, team work, the value of failure and identity in the classroom. In regard to this prior idea, 4 stated a relevant impression: "I think I improved a lot English, before, I did not like much the idea, I'm very shy, but when I started, like, I have improved in everything, I feel much better with what I have done..." (Semi-structured interview, November 18<sup>th</sup>-2021). As Burke (2014) referred, gamification proved to be a powerful engine for motivating and engaging learners to achieve their purposes as well as when it came about achieving organizational goals.

Furthermore, as revealed in chapter 4, students went over deeper understandings as regards to the why and how of the L2 language schemes. Profounder macro-skills and micro-skills of the English language, as stated before, can be intricate and confusing fields when mastering any language. Anyhow, this study showed that even complex grammar topics can be grasped. As Figueroa (2015) stated in his study about gamification in English learning: it is an approach that engages learners into positive and meaningful experiences enhancing the learning of all the skills of the language, providing motivation and interaction in lessons.

This study presented important insights about the teacher's role when implementing the gamification means. In order to gamification flourish, as participants expressed, the teacher must possess certain chief features: (1) have an excellent communication and relationship with students, (2) the ability of encouraging students, (3) knowing students in-depth and working over their real necessities, (4) granting enjoyable narrative and, most important, (5) love what is being done. As 2 expressed: "having a gamer experience not necessarily, but you mostly needed a piece he would mostly need a person or a teacher, or

Yeah, the teacher can encourage the students in order to start playing. If you can or you can't encourage the students to start playing. It would end up like one of the teachers that once tried to do this, but nobody wanted to participate.” (Semi-structured interview, November 18<sup>th</sup>-2021). As Sailer et al (2013) wrote, gamification strongly depends how it is implemented and integrated in the classroom. In addition, Brown (2007) expressed that a teacher cannot commence to teach without first attending the students’ anxieties, motivations and other personality fluctuations.

### ***Improving Virtual Spaces L2 Lessons Vis-À-Vis Gamification***

As analyzed in Chapter 4 from the data collected, students still perceive virtual spaces as similar traditional educative realms where traditional on-site classes approaches are still adopted and not adapted. As 3 uttered: “We don’t learn the same way, it lacks human quality, how to get out of the screen? In spite of this is the generation of video games and virtuality” (April 30<sup>th</sup> -2021, Focus Group). Gamification served as an instrument to bring more engaging, participative, interactive and collaborative L2 lessons in virtual spaces. Factors like competitiveness, providing different opportunities, challenge, cooperative and collaborative work, immediate feedback triggered students’ performances in virtual settings. This study showed, as stated by Figueroa (2015), Strmečki, Bernik, and Danijel (2015) and Tenório, Reinaldo, de Góis, & Lopes (2017) that information in digital realms is in fact processed differently. Those dwelling in digital spaces are well aware of the potential benefits of the internet and the social construction around it.

In addition, the data analysis showed that gamification, in virtual classes, is not only about using gamified digital platforms but providing proper guidance and carefully designed interactive materials meeting the students’ real goals, feelings and experiences. As Strmečki, Andrija & Radosevic (2015) discussed in their study, gamification in e-learning

must provide focused activities, rewards and progress tracking processes, as it was performed in the interior this study. Moreover, this study showed that it is fundamental to comprehend the learner's types and their habits for the gamification implementation and accomplishment (Strmečki, Andrija & Radosevic, 2015).

In conclusion, gamification brought alike excitements found in video games into L2 virtual lessons scenarios (Burke, 2014; Gee, 2003; Kapp, 2012; Vargas-Macías, Rodríguez-Hernández, & Sánchez-Saenz, 2020; Zichermann and Cunningham, 2011). It was not about making students to feel entertained through games but, it was apropos bringing the similar challenges, commitment, team work, competitiveness, and experiences met in video games into L2 virtual learning and teaching developments, empowering the learners to reach their goals (Burke, 2014; Gee, 2008). This study revealed that gamification is a powerful tool for providing positive outcomes in virtual classes, L2 lessons and L2 test preparation progressions. Finally, the study showed that students not only perceive much better processes when implementing gamification but they transcend and take the mastered strategies into other real-life and personal scenarios.

### **Implications**

English language teaching and L2 test preparation not only affects the processes held in the area but, furthermore, impacts everything involved in the educational framework. Thus, different stakeholders such as educational school context, teaching education programs and policy makers take place when addressing the implications of the current study. Below, keeping in mind the findings and conclusions, I discuss those implications.

### *School Educational Context*

Virtual education and second language education are contexts that still require broader views from multiple perspectives. The outcomes of the current study seek to foster a better equilibrium between school education, with its multiple demands for students, and English as a second language education; it suggests possible modifications to the way we, the teachers and learners, are conducting the teaching and learning practices of the English language.

There is call to the educational community to work together to make informed and conscious decisions about reframing not just the curricula but the way lessons are being addressed, mainly, most of them, still happening in traditional scenarios without understanding current generations thoughts, feelings and ways of learning. As the current study demonstrated, gamification is just one strategy, among many others, to break the panorama of traditional school scenarios and present education as something enjoyable, challenging and meaningful. In order to improve gamification experiences, curricula must be connected to students' current realities, experiences, real needs, interests and socio-cultural backgrounds.

As the present study presented, high school students are capable of interacting and engaging through gamification in diverse situations, even outdoors the second language realities. Educators need to take into account the characteristics and processes of the language, and the facets linked to them inside the cultural, social and emotional learners' authenticities. Teaching community can truly foster teaching practices that embrace student-centered veracities that guide students into constructing the knowledge in more interactive, challenging, collaborative ways. ESL must not be limited by the mere fact of

the acquisition of the language but to an integral education linked to the human being phases.

The findings from this study also illustrate the need for a democratic study plan creation where all parts from the educational context participate, negotiate and propose the curriculum to be constructed. A curriculum of the students, by the students and for the students. Additionally, the teaching community must start seeking, among countless options, for students-suitable methodologies, approaches and strategies to encourage students into an evocative learning where their voices could be heard.

It is also fundamental that the teaching community open spaces for reflecting in the way we carry on our practices looking inward at our own conventions, biases, stereotypes, principles and philosophies in order to discover and understand how those scopes influence our own teaching. Gamification should be gradually presented in school communities to avoid delusions and misapprehensions; this is relatively a new concept but offers worthwhile alternatives for embracing current rapidly-changing times.

Learners have many ways to face knowledge and school communities should not undervalue what all students are capable of doing. Too often students are seen as mere empty vessels to filled with knowledge, while, on the contrary, knowledge is a social construction where teachers are called to explore opportunities for contributing with an integral educational process where students are appreciated as human beings.

### **Teacher Education Programs**

Universities are called upon responsibly educating future teachers and current English language teachers. Therefore, the current study places implications for the teacher education programs; first of all, this study suggests the inclusion of gamification and other similar strategies in education programs, or at least courses where future educators start



comprehending the existing educational realities. Second, this is an opportunity for universities to start exploring alternatives in terms of methodologies and approaches in L2 classes, alternatives to bring close a relationship between students' needs and contexts themselves.

As well, it is imperative, as my mentor said, to bring more teacher-researchers that explore and understand existing realities, that provide notions, ideas of the educational arenas and, moreover, share their knowledge and experiences in formal and not-so-formal spaces; I, a teacher-researcher gamer, discovered gamification through reflection spaces where other teachers pointed out new directions within my profession. These "spaces" include the cafeteria, the gym, and even the video games themselves. Thus, teacher education programs are called to understand and bring more of these spaces that, sometimes, are underestimated.

### ***Educational Policy Makers***

We live in a society where policy makers are usually the ones who are the farthest from current education realities and take the most important decisions in this field. Test-driven and standardized education places a lot of pressure on schools and learners so they meet certain measurable knowledge, a knowledge that not necessarily plays in favor of L2 learning and teaching. In order to avoid standardization and take education a step forward, it is key to start connecting learning with students' lives, experiences and realities, education must be more flexible in terms of scoring and more demanding in bringing up moored educational policies to students' real wishes and needs. As said before, gamification is only one tool of many others that can start breaking the present standardized epoch.

## **Limitations**

Below, I will explain the faced limitations when working on this study. I came across issues I could not control by then, and situations that can be improved.

### ***Lack Of Understanding Among Some Colleagues and School Administrators***

When showing the consent forms in the school for conducting the current study, most of the school directives and administrators had a misconception, or no conception, about gamification in education in general, or in English teaching and learning grounds in particular. Initially, as detailed in the second chapter, there was a confusion among the concepts of playing games, playing video games and gamification. But, after the research presentation and the clarification of the concepts and their differences, they were more attracted in knowing about gamification and its possible outcomes in virtual spaces and on-site spaces. Anyhow, these concepts still need more mastering and deeper exploration of literature.

Furthermore, when sharing ideas with colleagues, I faced two occurrences: on the one side, there were many colleagues who had some lack of understanding about gamification, even committing the same misconceptions that school administrator had. But, on the other hand, I learned that informatics teachers' team and some languages teachers already apply gamification strategies in their classes. Little by little, gamification strengthens inside the educational arena.

### ***Alternating Schedules and Classcraft Implementation***

At an early stage of the current study, I employed the digital platform *Classcraft* to possibly answer the current research's question, nevertheless, there was an enormous impasse that forced me to stop implementing it in virtual lessons: students went to alternating schedules, it means that three of the five days of the week, students had to attend

school instead of virtual lessons. Another standoff is that within the school policies, it is not permitted the use of cell phones in classes unless they are applied for pedagogical purposes, and, even if this was the case of a pedagogical implementation, the school did not offer a public internet red so that students could access to the platform when in school. As a consequence, students had to wait to arrive home to do the activities posted there or get their feedback. This situation not only proved to be time consuming for both teachers and students, but diminished students' motivation towards the use of the platform.

### ***Literature on Gamification for L2 Test Preparation***

As a novice researcher and educator in the gamification arenas, I realized that there is little or no literature in gamification for L2 test preparation. I applied searches in academic search engines such as *Google Scholar*, *the UPB institutional repository*, *BASE*, *Science.gov*, *Semantic Scholar*, and *ERIC*, among others. Most of the literature on L2 test preparation was based on students' performances or studies proposing seeking better L2 test preparation practices but none of them was linked to gamification. The gamification into L2 test preparation search showed to be unfruitful.

Keeping in mind this, I felt restricted from finding prior studies to provide notions, ideas and possible outcomes to support my study, to provide guidance in the implementation of gamification in L2 test preparation settings. Nonetheless, this motivated me to develop a stronger commitment with my research and its possible impact it could have on other students and teaching communities around the globe.

### ***Time Constraints***

This study was meant to be held within the 2021 academic year, nevertheless, throughout the academic year several impasses took place. In the first place, eleventh graders went over many institutional activities such as *Horas Constitucionales*,

psychological orientations, community acts, other subjects' special celebrations and so forth. These institutional activities, from time to time, came across with the gamification lesson plans disrupting a fluent implementation.

As well, over the months of May, June and July, I, the teacher-researcher, had some considerable health issues that paused the implementation of gamification for L2 test preparation and my work as teacher in the school.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

The findings of this study could be taken as a starting point for how gamification can be fostered and developed in L2 test preparation setups, nevertheless, this study is just an insight of the many potentials studies that could be held and constructed around this hub. Future research in the gamification and L2 contexts would prove to be valuable for the education frameworks. This is not a study that can be generalized to all population; thus, it is important that the existing study be repeated with different populations, population numbers and, even, indoors other areas in order to support gamification as an operative strategy.

Keeping in mind the findings of the current study, I suggest consider to be worthy to do for further research posing the following questions:

- How and what gamification mechanics and elements are more pertinent in educational arenas?
- How does ICT influence the development of gamification?
- How does gamification impact gamers and non-gamers communities?

### **A Personal Reflection. What Did This Study Mean to Me?**

This study represents a journey to find answers to foster better learning and teaching progressions in the Colombian educational field. I, as a teacher-researcher, consider

education as a way to change the world, to bring meaning to students' lives and even mine. Education is not only a job for me, it is an arena where I struggle to find answers in the sake of illuminating others' lives, and these others continue igniting others' life sparks. Within this journey, I had the fellowship of my students, colleagues, friends, school directives and, moreover, my research adviser, who was not only the research adviser but life adviser who me in dark times of my life. Without his support, this study would have never been finished.

During this expedition, I gained knowledge to recognize myself as a teacher, person and apprentice. This study took me over a constant construction of my teaching profession that began 12 years ago. I always try to find new elements, strategies and ideas that can help me to do my job better in order to reach my students through integral and significant practices. This study helped me to foresee that education is always changing, transforming and, it mainly depends on our passion for what we do: renovate lives in massive ways.

My biggest hope is that this study leads other teachers into what education truly means, its real purpose, and grants meaning to those lives thirsty of understanding themselves through hard times like these. I strongly believe what Abraham Lincoln said in his first political announcement in New Salem, March 9, 1832: "Upon the subject of education ... I can only say that I view it as the most important subject which we as a people may be engaged in."

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