Gamification as a new direction in teaching Polish as a foreign language

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Abstract

ICT is usually used in Poland in areas like the Internet, interpersonal communication and information recruitment. Opportunities of ICT in teaching Polish as a foreign language were noticed only very recently. In present didactics innovative ways of teaching are more and more desired. Current technology development favours innovative ideas. In the recent years in Poland a few e-learning platforms and some pages presented, but only in short, the Polish language system. The extent of complexity of the Polish language and its difficulty results from a complex grammar system (expanded nominal and verbal inflection), numerous irregularities and high level of synonymy. Teaching one of 5 the most difficult languages in the World demands using the most effective and attractive instruments.

In our speech we want to present the on-line games potential which can be transferred into language teaching. Elements characteristic for games (good competition, character development, improvement, inspiring and creative challenges, activity) can easily be adapted for the needs arising during language classes. For younger students virtual reality seems to be natural and the traditional teaching methods stop fulfilling their functions little by little. The combination of the previous ways of teaching with the rules within on-line games may be a mile stone in teaching Polish as a foreign language. The results would be: increase of motivation, easiness of lexis revision, an increase in the rate of memorizing new structures, getting accustom with grammar, erection of positive relations with the teaching subject.

What is the crux of gamification?

In the book written by Heath brothers "Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard" [1] an interesting metaphor appears. It presents the core of emotional intelligence – the authors make figures of the Rider and the Elephant: a personification of a human making a decision. In all of us there is a rational rider who knows what we should do, as well as a lazy elephant who does as he likes. The rider has the knowledge where we are supposed to get, but the elephant has more strength. The only way is to outsmart him. Outwitting the elephant, which means our emotions, habits and primeval laziness, consists in turning duty into pleasure.

It is – in the most vivid way – a simple definition of gamification. It is a new trend of introducing game mechanics (things like points, levels, badges, virtual currency, activity feeds, challenges, quests) to areas that traditionally have nothing to do with games. The mechanism itself is not an innovation, an element of it was introduced by Frequent Flyer program dated back to 1981. Recently, gamification has been practiced on a larger scale in business, ecology, mobile communications, coffee house services and slowly in education web portals. In December, global research agency Millward Brown published a report of 12 trends in digital media that will be dominating in 2012. Gamification ranks the first place [2].

In Poland, the term "gamification" is only now hitting social consciousness thanks to the first book on the subject written by Paweł Tkaczyk, which came out this year [3].

Paweł Tkaczyk defines gamification as a trend of turning things that do not please us into pleasure and create desired behaviour in real life [4]. In our speech we want to emphasize the power of this phenomenon and possibilities of applying it to a specific field which is education, on the basis of Polish as a foreign language class. In the beginning we are going to answer the question: what, in fact, is a game? Then, we are elaborating on the issue of conditions to be met by a lesson designed as a game. A quite detailed analysis of the teacher's tasks with an emphasis on the problem of rewarding will be presented at the end.

A lesson as a game

Classic works concerning games present a ludic and sociological understanding of the term "game". We would like to suggest an understanding of a *game* from a metastrategy and classes organization scheme perspective. An education specialist Laura A. Sharp created a separate term for gamification in education: *gamucation*, which she defined as "fusion of digital gaming and education that promotes, attracts, engages, motivates, and helps the student retain information to increase learning" [5]. The author reminds us that education must take up a challenge posed by the Digital Native (people born after 1980).

Why an ordinary teenager from a developed country spends 10 000 hours playing computer games until they reach 21 years of age [6], while on the other hand complains about the amount of time which must be spent

studying? To begin with, let us take a look at indispensable elements of the "game".

According to Sarah Smith-Robbins every game should have three basic characteristics: a goal, obstacles, collaboration or competition [7].

1. **A goal**: in the case of students who stay in Poland within Erasmus program it may be for instance reaching a satisfying level that allows them to communicate in everyday situations. The goal should be clearly and precisely set. How the whole game will proceed is dependent on that factor. A lector should be aware of the players-student's' needs. Gathering points and winning badges will be determined by this main aim of the game-course.

2. **Obstacles**: *difficulties and challenges* – tasks, homework, tests that will be given by the lector during the course, but also student's laziness and lack of time. They are connected with the whole system of gathering points, collecting badges, clearing consecutive levels and a specific set of rules including player's rights (for instance, the possibility of 1 absence per semester) and banned activities (e.g. ban on using a mobile phone during classes).

3. **Collaboration or competition**: Games are divided into those in which we fight against other players and we win by defeating them, and those in which we must beat the game itself, so *de facto*, fight against ourselves. Foreign language learning could be treated as a Caillois' *ilinx* [8] – overcoming one's own communication barrier, but also as an *agon* when we compete with others for a score.

To this set we suggest adding four elements [9] that may contribute to a student's greater involvement in teaching a language.

- **Challenge** – a specific issue or communicative skill can be treated as a challenge; if an issue is complicated, for example, noun inflection, it should be divided into a few challenges. In an instance of Polish language - 7 cases into 7 challenges. Breaking an aim down into its constituent parts makes it more motivating and closer to the student.

- **Curiosity** – classes should contain an element of surprise. One may use a text about some interesting discovery, use an information gap, encourage students to check if they are right, keep them in suspense by granting bonuses in irregular time intervals.

- **Control** – A student's awareness of the fact that his or her choices have an immediate and visible effect, are the key mechanisms that attract people to playing games. An autonomy is connected with control. Students act as part of a game, but it is they who choose a point scoring strategy. By monitoring their development, students of their own free will decide if and how to score more points. While, from the teacher's perspective the control is understood as a supervision of the game's structure.

- **Fantasy** – Game should fascinate, interest with its plot. It may be distant from real life, though its rules should be placed in some logical context. It is crucial that the game is nonlinear. Student should be in contact with it not only during classes. On Polish language course additional points could be scored for finding an interesting article on the subject discussed in the classes, for finding a mistake in a leaflet or menu, for bringing a song lyrics in which newly acquired structures appear, for instance, forms of a conditional etc.

In teaching we attribute a great significance to the lector. His or her roles we would see as follows:

1) The author of a story

It depends largely on the lector which story will they choose for their classes. Since foreign language classes usually are held in small groups, we can divide students into two teams. Each of them chooses a historical figure who is supposed to be their warrior (an avatar). The warrior has to score the right number of points in order to purchase weaponry needed for an expedition. The points can be awarded to students for solving short lexical or grammatical tests during every classes, doing homework tasks as well as additional exercises, and general activity during the lessons, e.g. 2 points for presenting a dialogue correctly – a purchase of tickets at the station, but 10 for a story about a dream journey.

After one of the groups scores the right number of points for its first aim, it starts scoring other ones in order to visit castles. If the points are scored quickly enough, they enable students to choose the shortest way that leads to the castle. That is why it is important for each team to solve tasks systematically so that, they could outstrip the competition and block a specific route.

In the castle students can find other tasks and by performing them they can occupy particular territory worth a given sum of money. The winning group is the one which occupies as many territories as possible.

In the classroom, there should be a chart and a table with scores hanging on the wall, which are supposed to be updated systematically. By presenting current hierarchy, statistics involve our emotions and become not only a cognitive mechanism, but also motivating and engaging in the fight for status and power.

Obviously, the number of stories one can invent is limited only by the lector's imagination and creativity. It is the lector who is supposed to be the "lord" of contexts and the guide to his course, who shepherds students through its all stages.

2) The creator of rules

The lector decides which rules go into effect during their classes. Main principles should be presented at the very beginning of the course (eg. in the form of instructions) – similarly, the list of their rights and duties – moves and bans of participants.

The right establishment of rules is the most laborious, but also an essential stage of working out a game. Carrying it out thoroughly can give the teacher an unwavering sense of control and maintain his/her authority all the time. Moreover, the teacher provides students with a sense of safety, which is a result of a certain measure of predictability.

The system of students' grades requires special attention. If the teacher decides to introduce a point system, he/she has to notify students how many points they deserve for a particular step (short tests, projects etc.). In contrary to students' attitudes towards gaining positive marks which are usually connected with their external motivation, through the point system we enable students to gain deeper motivation. Since a game can act as a non-stereotypical activity in accordance with the tendencies of young people to enjoy this kind of entertainment, it may make the motivation more inner. Gamification allows people to fulfil their external needs (connected with collecting, winning an award) but also the inner ones (e.g. the need of prestige, power, development and pleasure).

As part of established rules, students should have a significant scope for autonomy. The teacher can make up a few different methods in which students will score points to defeat the master of game or just to get credits for the subject, e.g. bonus points for unannounced tasks, additional research.

Students act as part of a particular game, though a lot depends on them. Although, they score few points for a test, they can make up for their loss by being active during classes or preparing an interesting project. It is important that students see their progress. The score has to be changed systematically and consider the very present state of play. The issue of creating a feedback as fast as possible (either positive or negative) is of great importance as far as the students' progress is concerned. By completing a particular level, students know what exactly they have learnt and are also aware of the material's cohesion.

The level's completion should provide the player with something more than a specific prize. The main emphasis should not be on the material aspects or something as common as a credit for a course, but rather on achieving the "expert status". If a student remembered most of new words from previous classes, they should win "The Lord of Memory" badge, if they mastered the noun inflection, they should become "The Inflection Conqueror", when they wrote a good essay, we should award them "The Master of Pen" etc.

Scoring right number of points may provide students with some privileges, e.g. homework exemption or making writing a short text optional. However, if we consider the best students, such privileges may not be motivating for them. On the other hand, if a top student could pass his/her privilege to the poor one, thereby winning a "noble" badge, this would give him some kind of a power worth seeking. If he/she were served in a school canteen without taking his/her turn in the queue, he/she would not be perceived as a "nerd" but as a person of a higher status.

3) Behaviour synchronizer

The lector monitors "character development", observes transitions to next levels, raises standards and poses challenges. The lector also supervises the right course of the game and checks if the rules are obeyed.

4) A diligent optimist [10]

The teacher should heighten a sense of mastery in students, appreciate attempts to develop, and rather restrain from punishment for failure. In other words, in spite of "reward punishment system", "reward or no reward method" should be used. In such system, failed attempts to solve some tasks will not be treated as a personal defeat by students. Reaching a particular stage and satisfaction involved in it, will compensate them for little failures sadness. What is more, thanks to this system, students will always make progress in their work, they will have a sense of knowledge and skills increase. It will however, depend on them at what pace they will be being promoted to higher levels. The sense of control and responsibility for one's own success or failure are crucial in the process of broadening minds and acquiring skills, and may also, to a great extent, influence the motivation increase.

Conclusion

Gamification causes the student's and teacher's aims, however seemingly different, to meet in the last stage. Even, if for a student achieving a success in a game would be most important and motivating, he or she will unaware acquire specific knowledge or skills. The teacher's most vital goal – relaying knowledge through gamification, would be achieved in an exceptionally pleasant and non-stereotypical way.

We, believe that the gamification mechanisms could provide tools that will organize an innovative the education cycle. They allow us to determine and control specific teaching actions, and also to motivate and activate students. Thanks to the new formula, classes can become truly interesting, stimulating and

motivating the students towards self-development. What is more, if the lector takes care of a game's consistence, the new system as a whole will ensure students a feeling of safety and comfort, due to predictability and control of their behaviour. A game gives also a sense of autonomy and omnipotence. And what is probably the most vital thing, it teaches that there is nothing wrong in being mistaken.

References

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[2] *Vide*: http://www.slideshare.net/MillwardBrown/12-digital-predictions-for-2012

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[5] Retrieved from: Promoting Community Service and Global Awareness Through Gamucation.

[6] Cp. Tkaczyk, *Op. Cit.* p. 104.

[7] Sarah Smith-Robbins (2011). *This Game Sucks: How to Improve the Gamification of Education.*

[8] Roger Caillois (1958). *Les jeux et les hommes.* Gallimard, Paris.

[9] In the book *Making learning fun: A taxonomy of intrinsic motivation* (1987) Thomas Malone and Mark Lepper described them as four individual motivating factors.

[10] Similar term was used by Jane McGonigal in her book "Reality is broken" (2011).