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GIRO – Towards a gamified approach to teaching Romanian as a FL

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Abstract

Grounded in gamification against the background of the communicative era of teaching, but very much in debt to the digital approach, the research undertaken by our team of linguists delves into boosting motivation with the students from the Preparatory Year when learning Romanian as a Foreign Language (RFL). Working with the modern research framework offered by design-based research (DBR), we were able to observe while teaching, teaching while applying and adapting while using different gamified concepts within the teaching continuum during the experimental semester. Starting from the direct observation method which enabled us to measure low levels of motivation in our students, we decided to change the techniques in the second semester and to gamify the entire learning experience of our 27 students for 5 months, while developing their B1 level of language acquisition, both within the general module and as part of their specific vocabulary acquisition classes. Thus, capitalising on the extensive experience gathered as a result of both attending dedicated courses focused on the tandem gamification and education, and of the activities performed as members of the GIRO nationally funded project, we focused our teaching intention on creating a gamified setting for the first time in an academic environment, in Romania. Moreover, a new methodology was applied to RFL teaching, in which PBLs, SDT, the sense of belonging to a community, freedom of choices, learner engagement, scaffolding, boss fights, alongside game-based activities, such as: GooseChase, Storyjumper, Plickers, Wordwall, Kahoot, all supported by the ClassDojo platform, contributed to changing the habits of language learning and results achievement. Not dismissing the negatives of the approach, which only triggered valuable insights regarding the frame applied, but positively exploiting the benefits conveyed by it, the paper pragmatically indicates that a change in education can be the case when rooted in gamification.

Keywords: *gamification, game-based learning, motivation, digital era, communicative frame*

1. Introduction

Motivation has always been one of the key-concepts in education, but nowadays its importance has become exponentially more important, as the generation of learners engaged in the literation process, from official instruction to private tutoring or self-education, is one who needs to recognize similar discursive patterns to theirs. That is why, motivating the beneficiaries represents a real challenge these days, as the methodology of teaching based on the communicative approach has undergone significant updates once technology has elbowed its way into the classroom. Consequently, a real and successful impact, in terms of motivation, is directly related to the digital approach to teaching and concepts like gamification have turned into buzz words in this context. Born on territories outside the academia, and successfully applied into companies, marketing, human resources, business, administration, gamification may be the approach to re-establish the equilibrium among all the parties involved in the instructional process and to re-pin the complexity of motivation on the educational map.

Determination and motivation have established a supra-ordinated relationship, the first one being rooted in the second one, motivation fuelling determination, either intrinsically or extrinsically as the literature review shows when analysing its dynamics ([8], [13], [9], [16], [3]). Deci monitored the evolution of human motivation from 1975, with his study on *intrinsic motivation* [4], until 2000, when he profiled the self-determination theory (SDT) [5]. He proved that the path towards successful accomplishments starts from eliminating amotivation, the state in which nothing motivates one, passes through the state of extrinsic motivators, which act as stimuli for triggering a reaction towards achievement, and ends on the territory of internal psychological drive, where people can become the better versions of themselves. In 2001, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, reflected on the concept of *positive psychology* [12], in 2016, Berger talked about the *hidden forces that shape behaviour* [1], while Pink returned in 2011 to Ryan and Deci's SDT, when releasing *the surprising truth about what motivates us* [10] thus transposing the discussion into the business world to make it useful to companies for greater success achievement.

SDT, in Deci and Ryan's vision [5], is based on 3 powerful concepts: *competence,* grounded in skills, enabling one to successfully finish activities and tasks, *autonomy* founded on the idea of freedom of choice-making and independent decision-making with no impositions from the outside, and *relatedness,* built on communication, sharing, community and socialisation. All this establish a direct connection to the world of games, which are approached by children, teenagers, and adults alike exactly because everyone wants to experiment learning with curiosity, learning, joy and fun based on pleasant avatar onboarding, challenges, freedom of choices, boss fights, scaffolding, setbacks, feedback, etc.

Consequently, gamification, according to its early definition provided in 2002 by Pelling (in [6]), "the use of game design elements within non-game contexts", consists of extracting the core elements that create and organise the fictional world of games and applying them in different areas, in real-life, in order to re-/create a more pleasant working environment in which the beneficiaries are encouraged to be original, creative, free, full of initiative, motivated, and thus entertained within the limits imposed by the frame of rules, absolutely necessary, like in any game, in order for disorder not to occur.

Grounded in psychology and the complexity of motivation, Werbach and Hunter's studies on gamification ([14], [15]) minutely depict how *the components (C)*–accomplishments, boss fights, collections, avatars, content unlocking, rewarding, leader boards, missions, social graphs, insignia, and virtual goods, *the mechanics (M)*–challenges, cooperation and competition, feedback, resource acquisitions, and transactions and *the dynamics (D)*–constraints, emotions, narrative, progression and relationships of any game creation can benefit companies, institutions, educational establishments and any life-experience if only the most appropriate elements are selected from this pyramidal structure to be applied and the overall experience offered to the participants is ultimately aimed at.

2. Methodology

The present research is part of the nationally funded project *Gamification-Based Instruction for Teaching Romanian as a Foreign Language* which aimed at introducing the concept of gamification not only in the Romanian academic world, but more specifically in the classes of teaching Romanian as a FL. Consequently, the students targeted were those enrolled in the Preparatory Year at the Faculty of Letters from *Transilvania* University of Brașov. The trial started in the second semester of the 2021-2022 university year, after the focus group, consisting of 27 international students, 9 girls and 18 boys, aged between 19 and 22, had studied Romanian for 5 months, reaching the CEFRL A2 level. The research spanned between February-June 2022 and was interested in developing the productive language skills, as well as the specialised terminology in the fields of Engineering, Medicine and Sports.

Defined by Durrheim as "a strategic framework for action that serves as a bridge between the research questions and the execution or implementation of the research" ([7], p. 34), the methodology used was qualitative, i.e., the naturalistic method, due to its non-obtrusive and accurate manner of reporting the real-world events and practices. According to Hammersley and Atkinson's view over the naturalistic research from 1995, (in [11]), the world in a particular context, in our case that of a classroom, is studied as far as possible in its natural setting and the observers do not temper with the behaviour of those whom they are observing. Thus, using first of all a cross-sectional approach, as the subjects were monitored at one specific point in time, the data collection involved observation and field notes in the first-semester in order for weak points to be identified, and afterwards, followed into the footsteps of the methodological framework that best suited the context of our experiment, i.e., design-based research (DBR), in the second semester. This approach enabled us, according to its main feature, i.e., "test and refine educational designs based on principles derived from prior research" ([2], p. 15), to implement the new methods we aimed at, to measure the impact of their usefulness alongside our students' reactions and to adjust on the way, as a result of the feedbacked obtained on the spot from our beneficiaries, anything necessary. Thus, our students were not only passive recipients of a new methodology, but also active participants in tailoring the best practices for them, turning into designers of good practices.

In terms of research methodology ethics, the students were invited to give their consent regarding their participation in this research (see figure 1), their overt approval being obtained in the comments section of the official announcement posted on the Class Story section of the Class Dojo platform (see details below).

Fig. 1 – Students' consent

3. Results

As a result of identifying problematic areas concerning motivation, engagement and contribution to the instructional process in our students in the first semester, mainly because of cultural and language level acquisition differences, powerful gamification methods were implemented during the second semester in order for self-determination to be boosted.

The first decision that we made was to introduce, as a working instrument, the ClassDojo platform instead of Moodle, as the former is specifically designed to incorporate gamified elements. Thus, our students were invited to choose an avatar to represent their selves in the online environment of the educational experience, and already started to have a lot of fun while onboarding (see Figure 2).

Fig. 2 – Choosing avatars for a new educational experience

Deriving from choosing to work with ClassDojo, other extremely important issues could be solved, as a points-badges-leader boards (PBL) system was introduced by means of virtual points allotted or subtracted for specific aspects which needed improvement. Mentioned should be made that from the very beginning the students were informed in clear terms about the way in which the points would be transformed into real appraisal badges at the end of each week, which they were asked to physically collect. Afterwards, the leader board resulted would be displayed on an external platform, i.e., www.leaderboardhq.com, and invitations to check progress were posted on the Dojo Class Story every Friday (see Figure 3). At the end of the semester, the entire gamified engagement of the students was rewarded in real terms, by transforming the virtual ranking into either final marks or percentages of marks in their final exams.

Fig. 3 – The leader-board

Motivation regarding homework engagement was particularly addressed, the professors deciding to award points as follows: 1p for homework attempt, 2p for partial homework, and 3p for complete and correct homework, as prior student dedication for this assignment was very low. In this way, students started to progressively apply themselves to solving homework, as they could practically see their effort rewarded. Other aspects which could be amended through the PBL system included: presentation skills (3p), great answer (5p), great idea (3p), participating in activities (2p), teamwork (2p), colleagues' vote (2p), best score in partial test (5p), event contribution (5p), helping others (1p), working hard (2p), subtraction targeting only: not participating in activities (-2p) and being off task (-1p) (see Figure 4).

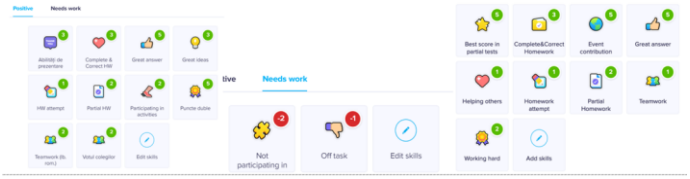

Fig. 4 – Assigning / subtracting points

Great answer, in terms of language correctness, and great idea, in terms of original contributions, worked hand in hand, encouraging both attention to language and originality, in this way students being motivated not only to express themselves, but to express themselves as correctly as possible.

Participating in activities, teamwork, colleagues' vote and helping others were all related to feeling part of a community, socialising, sharing, and even competing depending on the type of task, thus creating a sense of belonging and involvement, which is part and parcel of any game-like environment. Therefore, students started having fun, becoming more active, communicating with each other and practising their speaking continuously. For this, Goose Chase was used, a specially designed application which reunites working in teams with applied vocabulary, which we decided to

implement for applied language in the specialised areas of Medicine, Sports and Engineering our students were interested in. Thus, we designed original tasks for field practice, our students being supposed to provide real evidence via the mobile application of their vocabulary orientation in the real world (see Figure 5).

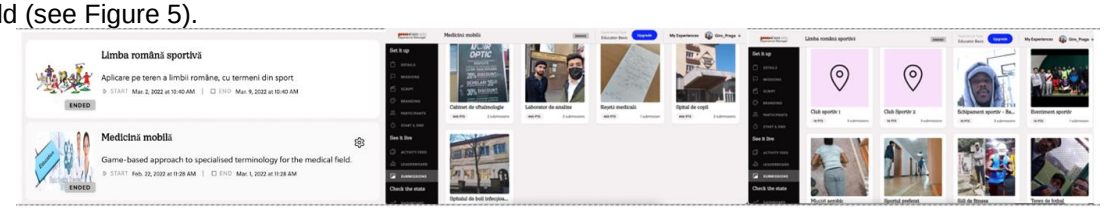

Fig. 5 – Goose chasing specialised terminology

Presentation skills and event contribution aimed at further developing speaking skills at the same time as building confidence and encouraging initiative taking. These particular entries on the points list enabled us to create a scaffolding type of moment, as a two-step activity was designed for our students: first, we organised an internal event in which all of them were encouraged to participate, and for which they were invited to prepare individual presentations in Romanian about their home countries. The event generated a lot of enthusiasm and involvement on the students' side, ending in colleagues' vote, points allocation and clear ranking. What triggered this particular moment was a level-up game-like situation, as only the first four positions could access the next level by participating in a national conference dedicated to foreign students studying the Romanian language, which was specially dedicated to cultural and civilisations aspects related to the home countries of the participants, under the form of on-line presentations, in Romanian. And it was with great satisfaction that our four best positioned students participated in this event, as a reward for their contribution to the internal competition. Figure 6 below displays moments from both the domestic moment and the external one, alternatively, in this order.

Fig. 6 – Scaffolding with student competitions

Last, but not least, offering feedback in a very fun and friendly manner, as part of the continuous type of assessment approach and in direct connection to what the world of games displays for the players within its quest trials, offering advice as well as the chance for the participants to go back and try again from another perspective, with a different approach, represented a desire for us in order to motivate our students to learn progressively, all the time. For this, we used the Plickers platform (www.plickers.com) which not only opened us the possibility to build a very dynamic and interactive way of assessing our students' performance, but it also enabled us to offer feedback in a very fun and constructive way (see Figure 7). This platform facilitates original test items design, but also interactive feedback, especially in its QR code version, which activates on a screen the results of the students by simply phone scanning their answers. Depending on the position in which they raise the code, automatic display of the ranking is displayed on the board. The online version is no less interesting as it permits the teacher to see in real time how students provide their answers, in terms of quickness and mind changing, thus collecting valuable information regarding test construction and students' problems with certain items.

Fig. 7 – Offering feedback in a gamified manner

4. Conclusions

Gamification, as a macro-vision over a teaching process, mixed with game-based, project-based, and task-based approaches, alongside traditional manual-based teaching within a communicative framework, can represent the corollary of the digital era we live in by recreating in classrooms the 3F (friendly, familiar and fun) dimension our students are so attached to, i.e., that of

gaming. Rooted in the psychology of self-determination, gamification plays the game of motivation, reorienting the darts, concentrically, towards the inner self and its recompensing.

Thus, at the level of *dynamics*, emotions, constraints, narrative, progression and relationships were all catered for in our experiment, as the grammar of the teaching process enwrapped the vision of the approach in all its details: boosting students' motivation by engaging them in dynamic activities to establish relationships, offering them freedom of choices within the boundaries imposed by certain limitations, in order for their diverse cultural background and their personal emotions to be considered.

Regarding the *mechanics*, challenges were offered to our students, the elements of chance appeared when exposed to different competitions and leader boards, rewards were offered all throughout, as well as feedback, cooperation being the main focus of the experiment.

Last but not least, in terms of *components*, the majority of the items profiling this ground level of professors Werbach and Hunter's pyramidal vision over gamification were activated, starting with avatars, teams, content unlocking, PBLs, gifting, physical goods, collections and achievements.

In this way, motivation was boosted and the experiment was more than successful meeting the desired objectives that it started from. At the same time, we managed to supervise the progression of the only negative aspect which occurred on the way, that of points chasing by some students, by alternating teaching methods and not relying exclusively on gamification throughout.

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