

**Fostering Cultural Awareness and Learning English as a Second Language in First Grade
Through Gamification**

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English.

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Thank you

In the first instance, I thank the Universidad Santo Tomás de Aquino for training me as a graduate characterized by my leadership and autonomy of the pedagogical, investigative and innovative spirit supported by the new curricular and methodological changes of the teaching of English, according to the linguistic and cultural needs and characteristics.

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And finally, I thank my tutor Nelly Álvarez, for providing me with her knowledge and accompanying me in the development of this research project, and the magister Nelson Rodríguez for his guidance and inspiration towards new educational horizons.

Finally, I want to express my gratitude to my family, who have been by my side giving me their unconditional support and have motivated me to continue growing professionally.

Dedication

This research project is dedicated to first graders who are beginning their English language learning and to teachers who believe in the transformative power of play as a tool for learning and social change. Through the didactic sequence developed I hope to inspire in them the love of learning English, and that it can be transmitted in an integral way in different scenarios.

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Abstract

This research explores the teaching of English as a foreign language to first-grade students, emphasizing gamification as a methodology to foster cultural awareness and strengthen language learning. In a globalized context, it is essential that learners not only acquire linguistic skills but also develop cultural sensitivity, enabling them to participate effectively in multicultural environments. The study was carried out at the Luis Carlos Galán Sarmiento Educational Institution in Cúcuta with first graders aged five to eight. Its objective was to examine the contribution of gamification to the development of cultural awareness and the acquisition of English as a foreign language. For this purpose, a didactic sequence titled “The Magical World of English: Learning through Adventure” was designed and implemented, integrating playful gamified activities. A qualitative action-research design was adopted, employing semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations. Findings revealed that gamification significantly enhanced students’ motivation, participation, and willingness to interact in English, creating a dynamic and meaningful classroom atmosphere. The results highlight gamification as a pedagogical strategy that goes beyond entertainment, becoming an effective tool to ensure language learning while fostering intercultural understanding. The study recommends the continuous integration of innovative methodologies to improve English proficiency and cultural awareness in similar educational contexts.

Keywords: gamification, cultural awareness, English learning, elementary education

Resumen

Esta investigación explora la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera en estudiantes de primer grado, destacando la gamificación como metodología para fomentar la conciencia cultural y fortalecer el aprendizaje del idioma. En un contexto globalizado, resulta fundamental que los aprendices no solo adquieran habilidades lingüísticas, sino también sensibilidad cultural que les permita participar de manera efectiva en entornos multiculturales. El estudio se realizó en la Institución Educativa Luis Carlos Galán Sarmiento de Cúcuta con estudiantes de primer grado entre cinco y ocho años. Su objetivo fue examinar la contribución de la gamificación al desarrollo de la conciencia cultural y la adquisición del inglés como lengua extranjera. Para ello, se diseñó e implementó una secuencia didáctica titulada “El Mundo Mágico del Inglés: Aprendiendo a través de la Aventura”, que integró actividades lúdicas gamificadas. Se adoptó un diseño cualitativo de investigación-acción, empleando entrevistas semiestructuradas, grupos focales y observaciones de aula. Los hallazgos evidenciaron que la gamificación mejoró de manera significativa la motivación, la participación y la disposición de los estudiantes para interactuar en inglés, creando un ambiente de clase dinámico y significativo. Los resultados destacan la gamificación como una estrategia pedagógica que trasciende la diversión, convirtiéndose en una herramienta efectiva para garantizar el aprendizaje del idioma y fomentar la comprensión intercultural. Se recomienda la integración continua de metodologías innovadoras que fortalezcan el dominio del inglés y la conciencia cultural en contextos educativos similares.

Palabras clave: gamificación, conciencia cultural, aprendizaje de inglés, educación primaria

Contextualization

The teaching of English as a foreign language has continued to evolve in response to the demands of an interconnected and multicultural world. In this context, it is crucial not only to acquire linguistic skills but also to understand the role of English in global communication. Within the classroom, teachers are expected to foster active and meaningful learning through methodologies that emphasize students' intrinsic motivation, where learning is driven by curiosity, interaction, and the willingness to engage with challenges in an increasingly interdependent society.

Foundational scholars such as Vygotsky (1978), Piaget (1952), Gardner (1983), and Dewey (1986) laid the groundwork for theories of constructivism, active pedagogy, and meaningful learning. Today, these perspectives are complemented by more recent studies that highlight how children learn best through active participation and contextually meaningful tasks (Coyle et al., 2021). In a globalized environment, English proficiency has become essential, particularly when approached through integrative motivation, which positions English as a second language and enables learners to thrive in multilingual and multicultural environments (Ushioda, 2020).

International experiences illustrate diverse approaches to bilingual education. For instance, Germany and France have implemented Mainstream Bilingual Education (MBE), integrating foreign language learning into various content areas, while regions such as the Basque Country and Catalonia have promoted bilingual models that strengthen both English and local languages (Lasagabaster & Doiz, 2021). In the United States, immersion programs have been widely adopted to promote both language proficiency and cultural integration, fostering bilingualism as an enrichment model rather than a remedial one (Thomas & Collier, 2022). García and Li Wei (2014) emphasized that successful bilingual programs must respect and preserve students' native languages while integrating new linguistic and cultural dimensions.

In line with these global trends, contemporary perspectives reject methods centered exclusively on grammar drills, memorization, and rote repetition, which remain prevalent in many classrooms. Eaton (2010) and more recent scholars (Ortega, 2021; Reinders & Wattana, 2021) argue that EFL instruction should prioritize dynamic, interactive, and culturally relevant strategies. Gamification, understood as the application of game design elements in educational contexts, has emerged as a promising methodology to enhance motivation, cultural awareness,

and autonomy. It aligns with the principles of Colombia's National Development Plan (PND), which emphasizes territorial equity, comprehensive education, and the CRESE framework (citizenship, reconciliation, socio-emotional education, anti-racism, and climate awareness). By embedding playful and participatory learning, gamification not only facilitates language acquisition but also strengthens the recognition of cultural diversity and social identity, particularly in early education.

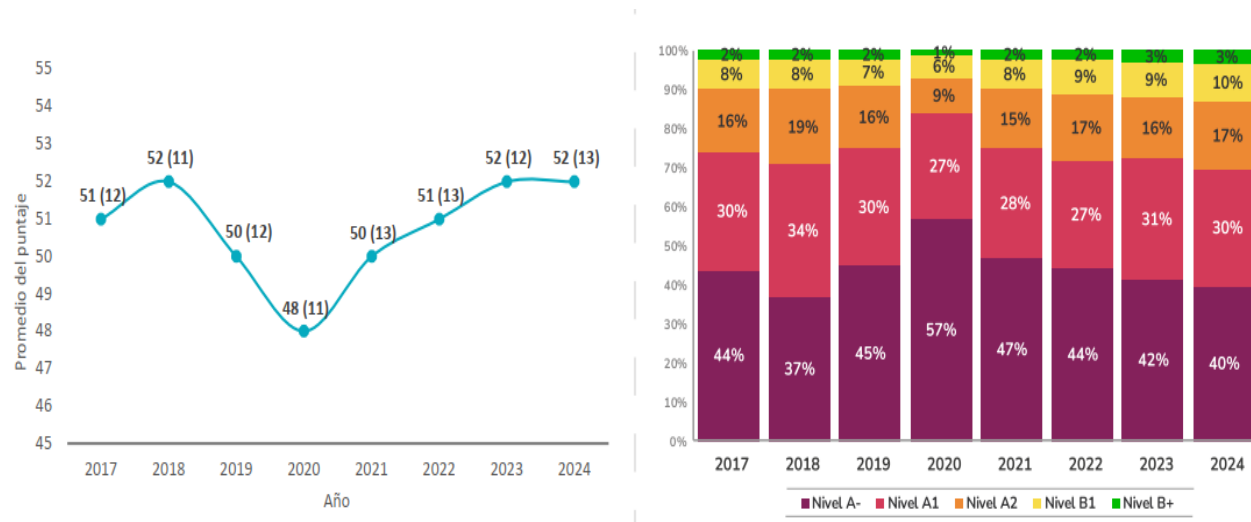
For young learners aged five to six, gamification is especially effective. Incorporating playful activities into lessons increases engagement, sustains attention, and promotes active interaction processes critical for cognitive and linguistic development. Foncubierta and Rodríguez (2014) highlighted the developmental value of gamification, and more recent evidence confirms that it supports vocabulary acquisition, reduces anxiety, and fosters spontaneous oral practice (Wagner et al., 2022; Das et al., 2025). These findings suggest that gamification provides a developmentally appropriate pathway for children to internalize language naturally, turning learning into an enjoyable and meaningful experience.

In Colombia, the Ministry of National Education has promoted initiatives such as *Bogotá Bilingüe*, *Colombia Muy Bien*, and the National Bilingualism Program, aimed at increasing English proficiency nationwide. The English test measures students' ability to read, write, and communicate in English. Unlike other assessments, in this case, performance levels are classified into five categories: A-, A1, A2, B1, and B+, in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Figure 1 shows the evolution of the average score between 2017 and 2024 in Calendar A. Overall, a progressive decline is observed from 2018, with 52 points, until 2020, when it dropped to 48 points, a year marked by the pandemic. From then on, the average began to recover, reaching the 52 points recorded in 2018 again in 2024.

The data also show that level A- is the most common, with participation ranging between 37% and 57% of students, reflecting a proficiency in English below a basic level. However, between 2021 and 2024, levels A1 and A2 each registered a 2% increase. Similarly, level B1 grew by 4% between 2020 and 2024, and level B2 showed a 2% increase over the same period. Overall, between 2020 and 2024, an improvement in performance was observed: the percentage at level A- dropped from 57% to 40%, although it remains the most representative, confirming that most students are still at the basic levels. Finally, the demographic factors for 2024 show

notable differences: men scored one point higher than women on average; students in the informal sector surpassed those in the public sector by 11 points; urban schools scored an average of 8 points higher than rural schools; and students belonging to NSE 4 achieved a score 22 points higher than those in NSE 1.

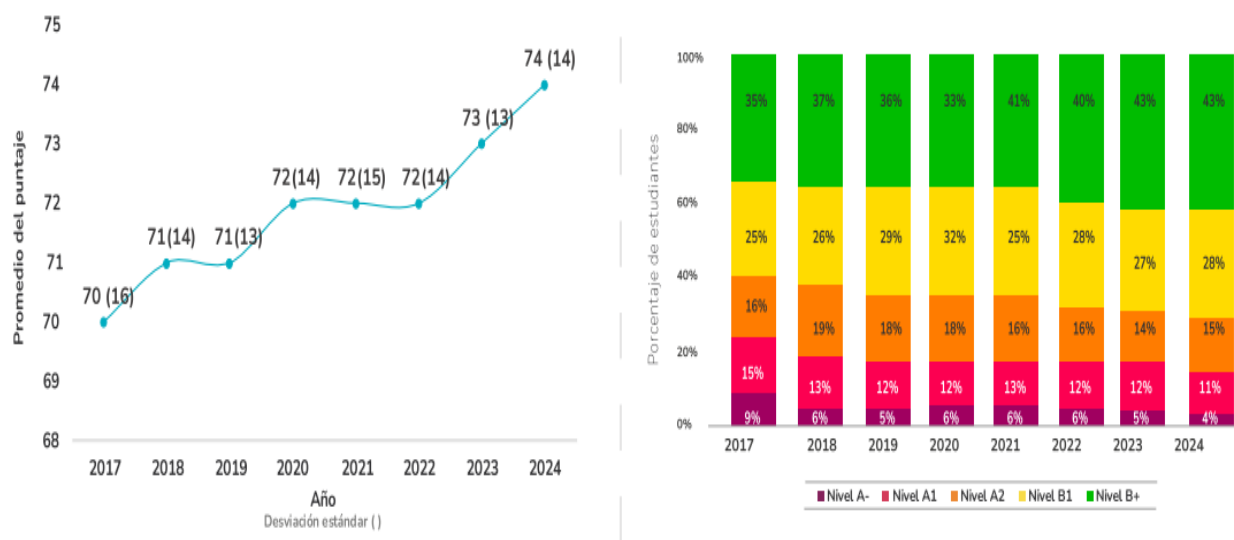
Figure 1.
Saber 11° 2024 test. Analysis of results calendar A.



Source: *Entrepreneurs for Education Foundation FExE.* (October 11, 2024).

Unlike Schedule A, Schedule B (Figure 1) shows an improving trend, rising from 70 points in 2017 to 74 points in 2024. Regarding the distribution of performance levels (Figure 32b), a large proportion of students are concentrated in levels A1 and A2, a trend that has remained stable over the years. However, the positive trend is found at the next level, starting at 8% in 2017, which decreases in subsequent years, but by 2024 stands at 10%. This increase, although slight, is significant, considering that the highest level (B1) remains very low (1%). Overall, the student level is concentrated in A1 and A2 (80% of those tested), being basic. Regarding demographic factors, regarding gender, women scored one point higher on the test average, while schools located in rural areas scored seven points higher than those in urban areas.

Figure 2.
Saber Test 11° 2024 Analysis of results calendar B.



Source: *Entrepreneurs for Education Foundation FExE.* (October 11, 2024).

Gamification, as a comprehensive teaching method, proves especially attractive to younger students (ages 5 to 6) because it awakens their interest in educational topics, promotes autonomy, and provides a natural and engaging context for language acquisition (Foncubierta & Rodríguez, 2014). This playful approach aligns with children’s developmental needs, improving motivation and concentration while facilitating the understanding and internalization of new languages through movement and interaction.

The integration of gamification to foster cultural awareness aligns with Colombia’s *Plan Nacional de Desarrollo* (National Development Plan, NDP), which emphasizes territorial equity, comprehensive training, and the CRESE framework (citizenship, reconciliation, socio-emotional development, anti-racism, and climate awareness). These priorities highlight the need to promote cultural recognition and strengthen social identity from early stages of education.

Nonetheless, student engagement must be carefully managed, since forced participation or “compulsory fun” can be counterproductive (Mollick & Rothbard, 2014). When thoughtfully implemented, gamification offers more than entertainment; it enhances the educational process and becomes a powerful pedagogical tool, as supported by recent studies. Its usefulness has been increasingly recognized across diverse educational contexts, where it encourages autonomous learning and fosters collaborative attitudes (Caponetto, Earp, & Ott, 2014). Thus, English language teaching must move beyond institutional requirements to embrace contextualized and meaningful approaches that respond to students’ interests, developmental needs, and the realities of the first-grade classroom.

Observations in Cúcuta's schools reveal the need for innovative strategies that transform English learning in first grade. Traditional practices often focus on transmitting linear content, which limits students' opportunities for participation and interaction. Gamification provides an alternative by connecting academic content with cultural awareness and meaningful learning. To achieve this, however, the lack of educational resources must be addressed through adaptable and accessible methodologies that maximize the tools available in each school.

This study draws on experiences from pedagogical practice at the "Alliance for Progress" campus of the Luis Carlos Galán Sarmiento Educational Institution, which offers preschool and primary levels in the morning shift. The campus has classrooms for each grade, a library, sports fields, a dining area, and restrooms. The school is in a community where commerce, domestic services, and transport are the main economic activities. The classroom teacher organizes lessons according to the institutional curriculum, making use of concrete teaching materials. However, technological resources are limited, with only basic sound equipment and a computer available.

At this institution, approximately 20 first-grade students have shown limited opportunities for active participation, partly due to the scarcity of innovative teaching strategies and the lack of teacher training in the use of playful and technological resources. These factors underscore the urgent need to implement dynamic pedagogical approaches such as gamification that not only capture students' interest and motivation but also improve their learning of English as a second language.

In this context, addressing the current situation of first graders at the Luis Carlos Galán Sarmiento Educational Institution requires rethinking the methodological approach to English teaching. Gamification, as an active methodology, revitalizes students' interest while integrating cultural elements into the learning process. In doing so, it transforms English instruction into a meaningful experience that develops linguistic competences, strengthens cultural awareness, and redefines pedagogical practice to better meet the needs of early education.

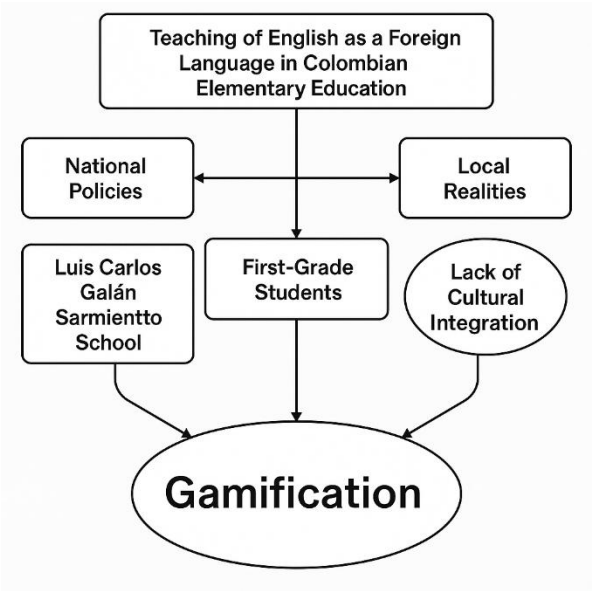
Research Statement

The teaching of English as a foreign language in Colombian primary education remains a complex challenge, closely tied to both national policies and local realities. Despite the National Bilingualism Policy and the requirements of Law 115 of 1994, which mandates the acquisition of communicative skills in a foreign language, the outcomes have been inconsistent and limited.

According to the EF English Proficiency Index (2023), Colombia continues to rank among countries with “low” English proficiency, and national assessments such as *Pruebas Saber* show that most students achieve only basic levels of competence (A1 or lower). These results suggest a significant gap between policy goals and the actual classroom practices, particularly in public schools.

The following figure visually synthesizes the main elements that shape the research problem. It illustrates the tensions between national policies, local realities, institutional and pedagogical challenges, as well as the lack of cultural integration in English language teaching at the elementary level. At the same time, it highlights gamification as an innovative strategy aimed at articulating these factors and projecting solutions that foster motivation, student participation, and the development of intercultural competence.

Figure 3.
Conceptual diagram of the research problem



Note. Own elaboration supported by AI.

At the local level, the Luis Carlos Galán Sarmiento Educational Institution in Cúcuta reflects these broader challenges. The city’s border condition and socioeconomic dynamics highlight the importance of English as a tool for mobility, yet the institutional conditions for teaching the language are insufficient. Students in first grade, who are at a critical stage of cognitive, social, and emotional development, encounter English instruction that is often limited to isolated vocabulary lists and translation exercises. Instead of being introduced to the language in meaningful and interactive ways, they face traditional methodologies that rely heavily on rote

memorization and repetition (Guerrero Nieto & Quintero Polo, 2021). This approach does not align with current understandings of language acquisition in early childhood, which emphasize play, interaction, and the development of communicative competence.

The limitations of teaching practices are compounded by structural barriers. Teachers in primary grades are usually generalists, responsible for multiple subjects, and often lack specialized training in English pedagogy. As Usma (2020) explains, the implementation of bilingualism policies in Colombia has been hindered by structural inequalities and insufficient investment in teacher training, particularly at the elementary level. In the case of Luis Carlos Galán Sarmiento School, the lack of specialized English teachers leads to an over-reliance on generalist methods, which do not adequately address the specific challenges of language learning. Furthermore, teachers often lack the technological skills and resources needed to design engaging, dynamic lessons, limiting their ability to incorporate digital tools, audiovisual materials, or interactive platforms.

A particularly pressing issue is the absence of cultural integration in English teaching. Language is often reduced to a set of grammatical structures and vocabulary, disconnected from the cultural practices, traditions, and values of English-speaking communities. This lack of cultural awareness prevents students from understanding language as a means of social interaction and intercultural dialogue. According to Byram (2021), effective language learning must include the development of intercultural communicative competence, which allows learners not only to use the language but also to critically engage with cultural differences. Porto and Zembylas (2022) further argue that ignoring the cultural dimension reduces language teaching to a technical exercise, stripping it of its transformative potential for citizenship and global understanding.

These institutional and pedagogical challenges are not unique to Cúcuta but are symptomatic of a larger issue in Colombian education. The British Council (2021) has highlighted that the gap between national bilingualism policy and classroom reality is particularly wide in rural and public schools, where resources are scarce and teachers lack specialized training. Without significant changes in teaching methodology and resources, the goals of bilingual education risk remaining unattainable for large segments of the population.

Gamification offers a promising response to this context. Defined as the application of game design elements in non-game environments, gamification transforms learning into a

participatory, motivating, and meaningful process (Wagner et al., 2022). In early education, where play is the natural mode of learning, gamification aligns with students' developmental needs by incorporating narratives, challenges, rewards, and collaborative tasks that sustain attention and reduce the anxiety commonly associated with foreign language learning. Research has consistently shown that gamification increases student engagement, improves learning outcomes, and fosters motivation in language classrooms (Wagner et al., 2022; Das et al., 2025). Moreover, by embedding cultural elements into games such as songs, stories, or traditions from English-speaking countries gamification also facilitates intercultural understanding and the development of cultural awareness.

In this way, gamification directly addresses the key problems identified in the institutional context. It counters traditional rote methods by offering dynamic, student-centered activities that promote active learning. It compensates for the lack of technological integration by making strategic use of digital resources, even in limited conditions, to create immersive experiences. Most importantly, it bridges the gap between language and culture, transforming English from an isolated subject into a cultural experience that connects students' own identity with that of others.

This research is therefore grounded in the need to rethink English language instruction in early grades, particularly in under-resourced public schools such as Luis Carlos Galán Sarmiento. By integrating gamification with cultural awareness, the study seeks not only to strengthen students' English proficiency but also to foster intercultural competence and positive attitudes toward diversity. As Colombia continues to pursue the objectives of bilingual education, initiatives such as this one provide context-sensitive solutions that can be replicated in similar educational environments.

Research Question

How does the implementation of gamification as a pedagogical strategy foster both English language acquisition and cultural awareness in first-grade students at the Luis Carlos Galán Sarmiento Educational Institution?

Research Objectives

General Objective

To analyze the role of gamification in fostering cultural awareness and strengthening the learning of English as a second language in first-grade students at the Luis Carlos Galán Sarmiento Educational Institution.

Specific Objectives

1. To examine the cultural and contextual factors that influence the relationship between gamification, cultural awareness, and English language learning in first-grade students.
2. To design a didactic sequence grounded in gamification principles that integrates cultural elements into the process of English language acquisition.
3. To reflect on the contributions of the gamified didactic sequence to students' participation, motivation, and development of cultural awareness.

The justification for this research lies in the urgent need to transform English language teaching practices in early education in Colombia, particularly in contexts such as the Luis Carlos Galán Sarmiento Educational Institution in Cúcuta. Current methodologies often rely on traditional, linear, and rote approaches that fail to capture students' interest, resulting in limited participation and superficial learning outcomes. In contrast, gamification has emerged as a pedagogical strategy capable of addressing these limitations by creating engaging, dynamic, and culturally relevant learning environments.

First, from a pedagogical perspective, gamification offers a methodology aligned with the developmental needs of young learners. By integrating play, narrative, and challenge, it provides a natural context for language acquisition, reducing anxiety and promoting motivation. This is particularly important for first graders, who require interactive, movement-based, and exploratory approaches to sustain attention and facilitate meaningful learning. The use of game elements such as missions, rewards, and role-play helps students internalize vocabulary, practice pronunciation, and develop communicative skills in English while enjoying the learning process.

Second, the research is justified from a cultural perspective. English learning should not be limited to grammar and vocabulary; it must also incorporate cultural awareness, enabling students to understand and respect linguistic and cultural diversity. Gamification offers a unique opportunity to connect language learning with cultural content, allowing children to experience

English as a gateway to new identities, practices, and values. This not only strengthens their cultural sensitivity but also promotes the development of social identity and intercultural competence from the earliest stages of schooling.

Third, the study responds to educational policies and national priorities. Colombia’s National Bilingualism Program and the Plan Nacional de Desarrollo (NDP) emphasize the need to improve English proficiency as a means of enhancing competitiveness and equity. However, national and international assessments consistently show low levels of English performance among Colombian students, particularly at the primary level. This research aligns with these policies by proposing innovative solutions that integrate gamification and cultural awareness, thereby contributing to the fulfillment of national goals for bilingual education.

Finally, the research has social relevance. In Cúcuta, a border region characterized by socioeconomic challenges and cultural diversity, access to meaningful and motivating English learning is limited. Implementing gamification as a pedagogical strategy in first grade can democratize access to quality language education by making it more inclusive, participatory, and engaging. Moreover, by fostering cultural awareness, the study promotes values of respect, collaboration, and openness to diversity, which are fundamental for peaceful coexistence in multicultural contexts.

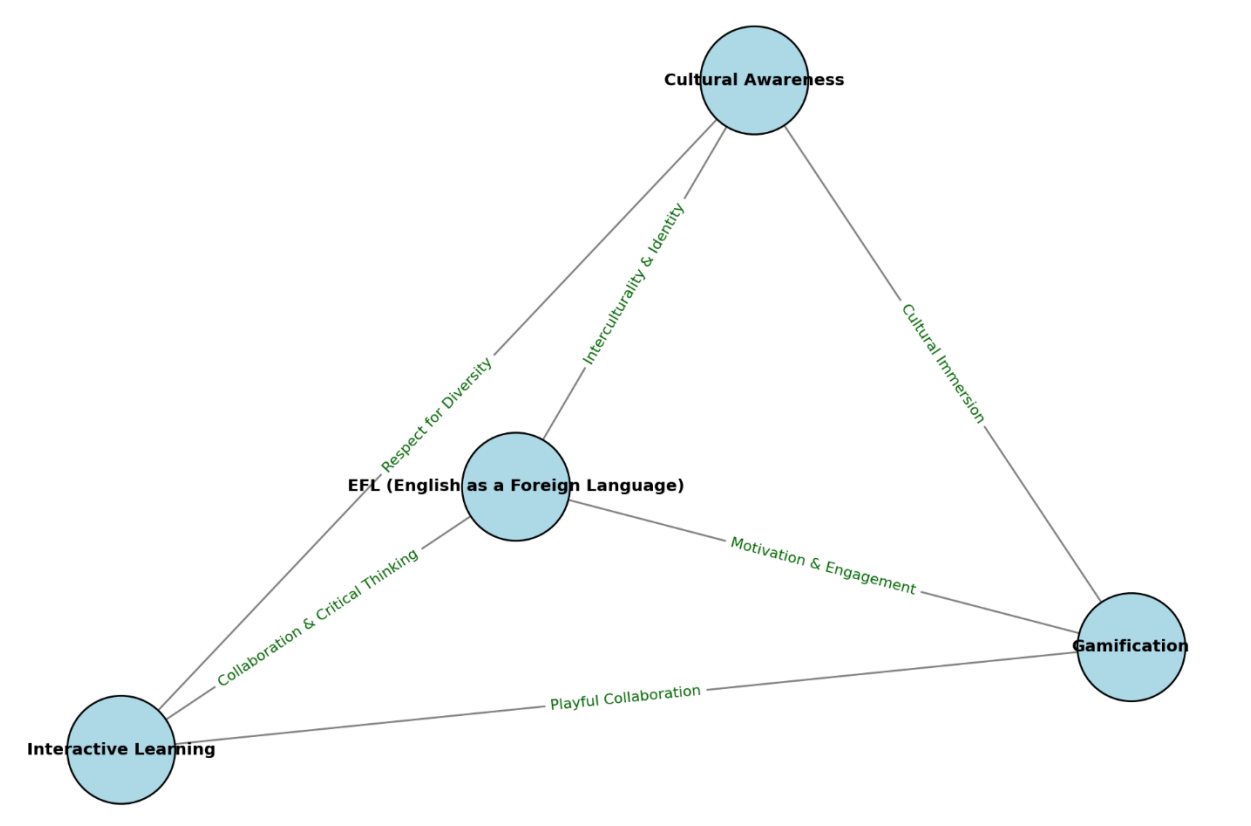
Literature review

The literature review was structured around four interrelated core concepts: English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Gamification, Interactive Learning, and Cultural Awareness. As shown in Figure 4, these elements are interconnected, illustrating how gamification enhances motivation and cultural immersion, interactive learning fosters collaboration and respect for diversity, and cultural awareness strengthens identity and intercultural understanding within EFL contexts. This conceptual map highlights the theoretical foundation of the study and the dynamic relationship among the reviewed approaches.

Figure 4.

Conceptual Map of the Literature Review on EFL, Gamification, Interactive Learning, and

Cultural Awareness



Note. Own elaboration supported by AI.

English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

The teaching of English as a foreign language has become an integral component of education in the broader framework of globalization. More than an option, it is increasingly a necessity in a world where individuals require new knowledge and skills to actively participate in dynamic social, cultural, and professional spaces (Crystal, 2012; Cenoz & Gorter, 2020). EFL, an acronym for English as a Foreign Language, refers to the teaching and learning of English in contexts where it is not the primary language, equipping learners with communicative skills for purposes such as travel, business, higher education, and intercultural interaction (Cámara Bilbao Idiomias, 2019; Richards, 2020). This approach is widely implemented in countries where English is not predominant, with the aim of enabling students to acquire practical competencies relevant to globalized societies.

Despite its importance, recent research highlights persistent challenges in EFL instruction. Orfan et al. (2021) and Noori et al. (2022) report that in regions with limited resources, reliance on grammar–translation methods remain prevalent due to insufficient teacher training and outdated materials. Similar trends are observed in Latin America, where English instruction is often constrained by scarce resources and a lack of innovative strategies (British Council, 2021). These limitations restrict learners’ communicative competence, confidence, and

ability to apply English in real-life contexts. Yet, at the same time, mastering English continues to play a decisive role globally, as it is recognized as the lingua franca of science, technology, business, and diplomacy (Graddol, 2006; Dearden, 2015). Proficiency in English not only expands access to research and academic mobility but also enhances employability and competitiveness in professional contexts (OECD, 2022). Furthermore, bilingualism has been shown to provide cognitive benefits, such as improved executive function, memory, and problem-solving skills (Bialystok, 2018).

Addressing these challenges requires a focus on teacher training and pedagogical innovation. Borg (2006) already emphasized how insufficient preparation perpetuates traditional methods that limit students' active use of the language, while Rahman (2022) stresses that ongoing professional development in communicative and digital pedagogies is indispensable for adapting instruction to learners' needs. Current studies advocate for interactive methods such as project-based learning, CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), and gamification, which strengthen engagement and foster deeper language learning (Cinganotto & Cuccurullo, 2021; Surakka, 2022). These approaches encourage not only linguistic competence but also the development of intercultural competence, which is essential in multicultural contexts (Byram, 2021). Incorporating authentic materials, cultural activities, and interactive tools motivates learners and situates language acquisition within meaningful experiences (Nguyen & Gu, 2022).

Within this panorama, gamification emerges as a particularly relevant methodology. Beyond promoting motivation and interaction, it integrates cultural elements that enrich the learning process and make English both enjoyable and socially relevant (Hamari et al., 2019; Özkan & Baydar, 2023). By combining technology, interactive strategies, and culturally grounded content, gamification contributes to transforming traditional EFL classrooms into dynamic learning environments where students not only acquire linguistic skills but also cultivate cultural awareness from an early age.

Gamification in language education: theoretical foundations and empirical evidence

Gamification has gained growing attention in education, even though the academic field still lacks a universally accepted definition. Most scholars, however, agree on its central concept: the integration of playful elements into contexts traditionally unrelated to play, such as education, professional training, and resource management (Álvarez, 2019). Grounded in

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, gamification aligns with the idea of the "zone of proximal development," which posits that learners can achieve tasks beyond their current abilities when guided by a more knowledgeable other. In this framework, gamification provides students with progressively complex learning experiences, supported by timely feedback and scaffolding from teachers (Álvarez, 2021).

Recent empirical evidence reinforces these theoretical perspectives. A study by Shen, Chu, and Yeung (2023) in northern China demonstrated that gamified, computer-assisted exercises significantly improved both reading comprehension and student engagement among seventh-grade learners. Their findings highlight that gamification in language teaching not only enhances linguistic competence but also equips students with digital skills, which are increasingly vital in today's technology-driven societies. Such evidence underscores gamification's potential to energize learning, support cognitive development, and strengthen cultural awareness, particularly in resource-constrained educational contexts.

As digital natives, today's students respond positively to gamification strategies such as role-playing, vocabulary challenges, interactive quizzes, and simulations of real-world conversations. These activities make learning enjoyable and accessible while fostering an appreciation of both the language and the culture it conveys. For instance, Vathanalaoha (2022) examined Thailand's *Winning English Program* (WEP), which integrates gamification into secondary education to promote bilingualism. Through government-backed policies, students engaged with English in authentic, everyday contexts, which not only strengthened their communicative abilities but also deepened their intercultural competence.

Gamification applies elements of game design such as symbolic rewards, point systems, and progress tracking to foster motivation, encourage perseverance, and reinforce skill acquisition. These mechanics provide immediate feedback that allows learners to adjust their strategies and recognize mistakes as opportunities for growth. Beyond enjoyment, this process supports the development of critical academic, social, and cultural skills, making language learning both meaningful and sustainable.

For gamification to achieve its potential, however, sustained investments in pedagogical resources and teacher training are essential. Teachers require continuous professional development to design and implement gamified activities effectively, while curricula must be adapted to balance playful methodologies with rigorous learning outcomes. A long-term

commitment to integrating gamification into English language teaching can transform classrooms into dynamic environments where participation, collaboration, and cultural awareness are prioritized.

Blended Learning as an emerging model: an analysis of its impact on teaching-learning processes

In the last decade, technology has transformed teaching practice, opening endless possibilities to enhance both teaching and learning. The rapid growth of digital tools has allowed education to transcend the limits of the classroom, giving rise to hybrid pedagogical modalities that combine the advantages of face-to-face and virtual instruction. Within this panorama, blended learning (BL) has acquired increasing relevance, as it integrates face-to-face interaction with online learning in a single, coherent process.

Although blended learning has been discussed for years in academic publications, the understanding of its scope remains fragmented, given that each study has analyzed the phenomenon from different contexts and educational needs. Graham (2013) defines BL as the combination of in-person and online instruction, while Ross and Gage (2006) identify it as the “new traditional model” (p. 167), highlighting its potential to reshape educational experiences. This model places greater responsibility on students, who construct their knowledge through guided scaffolding while exercising more control over their time, space, route, and pace of learning.

Recent research consolidates this view. Xiao and Zhang (2024), in their bibliometric analysis *Knowledge Mapping in the Blended Learning Classroom Environmental Studies (1996–2023)*, examined 283 publications indexed in the Web of Science and found that BL fosters environments rich in dialogue, supporting not only the acquisition of languages such as English but also the development of metacognitive and metalinguistic strategies. Their findings reveal that while the field grew slowly between 1996 and 2007, its expansion accelerated from 2012 onward, with a peak in publications in 2021—likely stimulated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which intensified reliance on digital and hybrid methodologies.

The design of blended environments integrates diverse technologies that can support both individual and collaborative learning. According to Stern (2004), these actions can be synchronous such as virtual classes, instant messaging, or live simulations—or asynchronous—

such as collaborative projects, digital walls, media production, or online assessments. As Shannon and Kathryn (2016) suggest, the key lies in ensuring that learners play an active role in these processes. Synchronous activities provide opportunities for real-time interaction, while asynchronous ones foster reflection and allow students to work at their own pace. This duality enriches the learning process, while also cultivating essential digital competencies.

Interactive learning and English language acquisition

The concept of interactive learning has emerged as an innovative pedagogical approach that actively engages students in their own learning process. It is grounded in the principle that knowledge acquisition is enriched when learners participate in activities that promote collaboration, communication, and creativity. As Strebna and Sotsenko (2017) emphasize, interactive learning should ensure that every student can develop, experience success, observe the outcomes of their intellectual work, and evaluate learning productivity, while also preventing situations in which one perspective dominates over others.

This approach values cooperation and dialogue among students not only as a means of acquiring knowledge, but also as a way of creating an environment in which diverse perspectives are respected and appreciated. By fostering teamwork, interactive learning allows students to share opinions, solve problems collectively, and reflect critically on their experiences. These dynamics not only strengthen comprehension but also encourage the development of transferable skills such as critical thinking, creativity, and adaptability.

Empirical evidence supports these benefits. For instance, Eli (2021) found that students responded positively to innovative and interactive methods, particularly in group discussions, which generated higher levels of engagement. His research highlights the value students place on the flexibility of interactive learning, as it allows them to adapt their education to personal learning styles. This personalization improves learning effectiveness and promotes autonomy, making students feel more empowered and responsible for their own progress.

Nevertheless, Eli (2021) also noted challenges, particularly the lack of adequate teacher preparation in using digital tools and modern didactic strategies. These findings underline the importance of professional development programs to strengthen teacher competencies and ensure the successful implementation of interactive methodologies. Collaboration between students and teachers is essential to overcoming these barriers and maximizing the potential of interactive

learning.

Ultimately, the incorporation of interactive strategies not only enhances student learning but also contributes to the preparation of future professionals equipped to face contemporary challenges. In the workplace, skills such as teamwork, effective communication, and adaptability to technological change are increasingly valued. Therefore, embedding interactive learning into curricular design has significant implications for comprehensive education.

In the context of English as a foreign language, interactive learning promotes active participation, fosters collaboration and communication, and supports the personalization of the learning process according to individual needs. By integrating interactive, student-centered dynamics, this methodology facilitates not only the acquisition of English but also the development of cultural awareness through activities that encourage reflection, problem-solving, and cooperation. Furthermore, its flexible and innovative nature complements gamification, creating a motivating environment where children assume responsibility for their own learning while simultaneously developing the linguistic and cultural competencies essential for their academic and social growth.

Cultural Awareness in EFL: Foundations, Pedagogical Practices, and Early Education Challenges

Canagarajah (2013) defines cultural awareness as the ability of individuals to align with diverse and dynamic communities, recognizing them as fluid and multifaceted. This view suggests that pedagogical practice should promote cultural awareness by respecting students' individuality and avoiding cultural bias. Integrating cultural awareness into English learning allows learners to think directly in the target language by labeling everyday elements and experiences in English (e.g., "*dining room*", "*greetings*") and gradually incorporating English into students' daily lives, creating a natural and playful immersion. Even simple practices, such as setting digital devices to English, can stimulate cognitive adaptation and encourage spontaneous language use.

Yurtsever and Özel (2021) emphasize that cultural awareness cannot be acquired instantly or through a single textbook. Instead, it requires continuous curricular integration and the promotion of English-centered educational environments. This aligns with gamification principles, where interactive and technological tools help make learning habitual, meaningful,

and culturally ingrained. Kamaeva et al. (2022) support this view, demonstrating that Saudi students exposed to culturally rich listening materials outperformed those who received instruction without cultural references, highlighting the value of culture-based pedagogy in improving vocabulary acquisition, listening skills, and awareness of linguistic diversity in English-speaking communities.

The development of cultural awareness also depends heavily on teacher training. Educators must move beyond teaching vocabulary and grammar to embrace innovative methods and digital tools that enrich English instruction. This reflects postmodern pedagogy, which positions teachers as facilitators who continually reassess their own cultural understanding and pedagogical strategies to design impactful lessons. Such practices not only improve linguistic competence but also foster positive attitudes toward diversity and equip students with critical social skills for intercultural communication.

Furthermore, cultural awareness nurtures broader social and communicative competencies by encouraging learners to engage positively with cultural differences and adopt innovative study methods. Teaching English with diverse cultural representations enables students to connect with authentic experiences of cultural interaction while strengthening their ability to navigate multicultural contexts. When combined with gamification and interactive learning, cultural awareness offers a pathway toward modernizing teaching practices and preparing students for active participation in a global society.

The literature consistently shows that English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is not just an academic requirement but a necessity in a globalized world where language proficiency enhances educational, cognitive, and professional opportunities (Graddol, 2006; Bialystok, 2021). However, traditional teaching approaches remain prevalent in resource-constrained contexts, often limiting meaningful language acquisition. Innovative methodologies such as gamification and cultural awareness have demonstrated significant positive impacts on student engagement and learning outcomes across diverse settings (Mollick & Rothbard, 2014; Qiao, Chu, & Yeung, 2023).

Despite these advances, there remains a gap in applying these methodologies to the earliest stages of education, particularly in first grade, where motivation, interaction, and cultural sensitivity are fundamental for developing lasting linguistic skills. Existing studies tend to focus on older learners, leaving a need for research that explores how gamification can be leveraged to

foster cultural awareness in early education. Addressing this gap, the present study proposes the integration of gamification with cultural awareness in first-grade English classrooms, offering a model that not only revitalizes student motivation but also strengthens intercultural competencies from the outset of formal schooling.

By merging playful and technological strategies with culturally rich content, this approach generates immersive and engaging learning environments that connect language acquisition with meaningful cultural experiences. In doing so, it promotes the development of linguistic, social, and communication skills essential for intercultural interaction, while simultaneously equipping teachers with innovative methodologies that enhance their autonomy and adaptability in multicultural educational contexts.

The literature review demonstrates that gamification, interactive learning, and cultural awareness converge as complementary methodologies that enrich the teaching of English as a foreign language. Gamification introduces playful and motivational elements that reduce anxiety and transform the classroom into a dynamic space where participation is both voluntary and meaningful (Qiao, Chu, & Yeung, 2023). Interactive learning, on the other hand, strengthens collaboration, communication, and problem-solving, creating an environment where students not only acquire knowledge but also learn to negotiate meaning and build critical skills collectively (Eli, 2021). Finally, cultural awareness adds depth to language learning by linking linguistic structures with authentic cultural experiences, fostering respect for diversity and preparing learners to engage meaningfully in multicultural contexts (Yurtsever & Özel, 2021; Kamaeva et al., 2022). Together, these approaches offer an innovative pedagogical framework that responds to the demands of globalization, while addressing the limitations of traditional methods often found in resource-constrained contexts. This synergy provides the theoretical foundation for the present research, which proposes the integration of gamification as a strategy to promote cultural awareness and strengthen English language learning in first-grade classrooms.

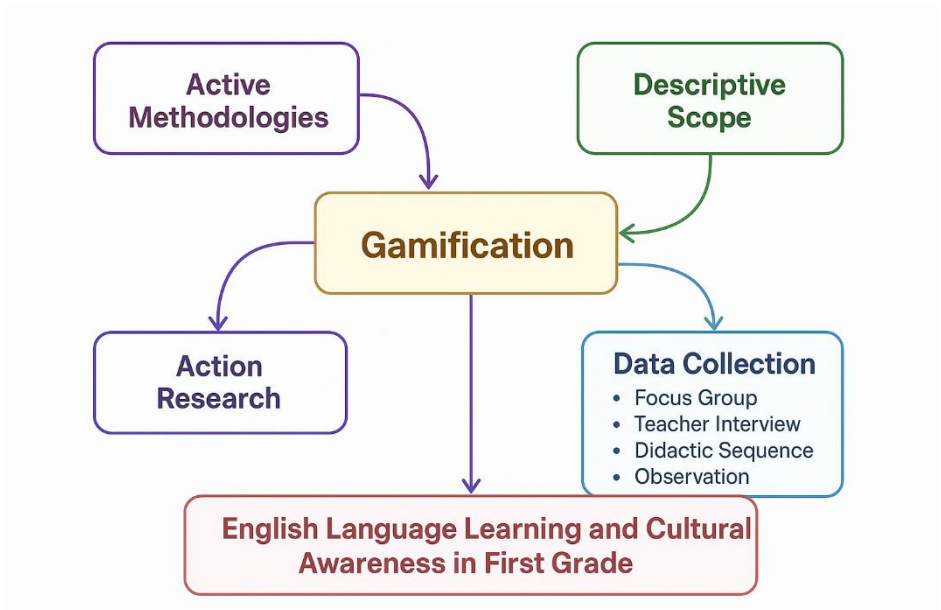
Methodological Design

Active methodologies in English teaching require teachers to intervene not only from a pedagogical perspective but also from a cultural one, since students become protagonists in the contrast between their own cultural background and the representations, they encounter in learning a new language. Vilugrón (2021) highlights multiple active methodologies such as

Project-Based Learning, the Flipped Classroom, Cooperative Learning, Problem-Based Learning, and Gamification. For the purposes of this study, the focus is on the latter, as gamification fosters favorable environments where knowledge is constructed through playful and meaningful experiences.

Figure 5 illustrates the methodological design adopted in this research, which is structured around a qualitative and descriptive paradigm supported by action research. This design underscores the role of gamification as the central pedagogical strategy, articulating its connections with active methodologies, the descriptive scope of the study, and the reflective and adaptive nature of action research. The figure also integrates the instruments employed for data collection focus group, teacher interview, didactic sequence, and observation guide highlighting their contribution to a triangulated analysis that ensures rigor and validity. By synthesizing these components, the figure demonstrates how the study aligns pedagogical innovation with cultural awareness to examine the impact of gamification on English language learning and intercultural competence in first-grade students.

Figure 5.
Methodological Design for the Implementation of Gamification in Elementary English Teaching.



Note. Own elaboration supported by AI.

This research is framed within a qualitative, descriptive paradigm, aiming to interpret the educational context and transform existing needs into opportunities for meaningful learning. In line with Lomax’s (1990) definition of research as a process of professional improvement that

contributes to social transformation, this study positions the researcher in constant interaction with participants first-grade students, their teacher, and parents—thus ensuring that findings emerge from lived educational realities.

The methodological foundation of the study is action research, understood as a reflective process that connects educational practices with their analysis to improve instruction (Bartolomé, 1986). This approach emphasizes adaptability and ongoing adjustment, enabling pedagogical strategies such as gamification to evolve in response to students' needs, institutional constraints, and the dynamics of classroom practice.

The scope of the research is descriptive, seeking to examine how gamification influences English language learning and the development of cultural awareness in first-grade students. In this type of study, the phenomenon is observed, described, and substantiated without manipulating variables or establishing cause-and-effect relationships (Sousa, Driessnack, & Costa, 2007). Instead, the aim is to identify connections between gamification, academic engagement, and perceptions of cultural diversity, thereby providing insights that may inform future studies (Ríos, 2017).

By incorporating gamification into primary education, a relatively recent innovation in English teaching this research contributes evidence about its advantages and limitations, particularly regarding its potential to enrich curricular design. Beyond documenting the effects on participation and comprehension, the study seeks to propose pedagogical adjustments that make the English classroom more inclusive, culturally responsive, and aligned with active methodologies that value the student as the center of the learning process.

Population and sample

The population of this project is composed of first-grade students from the *Institución Educativa Luis Carlos Galán Sarmiento* in Cúcuta. These learners, who are around six years old, are at the beginning of their process of acquiring English as a second language and are in a stage of cognitive and social development that makes playful and gamified strategies highly effective. As part of the early primary level, this population is characterized by curiosity, creativity, and the need for dynamic methodologies that connect learning with meaningful and engaging experiences.

Sample characteristics

The study population is composed of a total of eight (8) first-grade students, all of whom are six years old. The group includes both male and female learners, representing a balanced sample in terms of gender. The participants are enrolled at the primary education level, which is consistent with the focus of the research on fostering cultural awareness and supporting English learning as a second language through gamification strategies.

Table 1.
Population characteristics.

Feature	Description
Total number of students	8
Age	6 years
Sex	Male – Female
Educational level	Primary

Source: Authors.

The following table shows the characteristics of the sample, where age and gender are shown.

Table 2.
Study sample characteristics

Age	Male	Female
6 years	X	
6 years		X
6 years		X
6 years		X
6 years	X	
6 years	X	
6 years		X
6 years	X	
Total	4	4

Source: Authors.

The participants in this study were a first-grade group composed of eight children between the ages of five and seven, along with their classroom teacher, at the Luis Carlos Galán Sarmiento School. Although the number of students may vary due to enrollment changes and teaching staff may shift depending on contract renewals, the study ensured methodological consistency by focusing on the classroom as a natural learning environment. Ethical

considerations were addressed through informed consent obtained from parents, guaranteeing transparency and responsibility in both data collection and the implementation of the gamified didactic sequence.

Understanding the impact of gamification on the learning and cultural awareness of first graders provides meaningful insights into how playful strategies can strengthen language acquisition while fostering intercultural sensitivity from an early age. Beyond the immediate classroom context, the findings of this study hold broader implications for educational practice, offering guidance for the effective integration of gamification as a pedagogical approach that promotes motivation, meaningful learning, and cultural awareness in similar school settings.

Instruments for data collection

Focus Group

The focus group (look anexo 5) consisted of a collective interview with eight first-grade students from the Luis Carlos Galán Sarmiento Educational Institution. Its purpose was to explore students' emotions, motivations, and perceptions about learning English through gamified activities. Conducted in a participatory and dynamic environment, the instrument allowed children to express their feelings about the school climate, their relationship with the teacher, their preferences for class activities, and the role of games in learning. The group interaction encouraged spontaneous responses and self-explanations, which generated rich qualitative data on how gamification fosters motivation, reduces anxiety, and strengthens cultural awareness in early language learning.

Teacher interview

The interview was conducted with the first-grade teacher responsible for guiding English language instruction. Its aim was to understand the teacher's perceptions, practices, and challenges regarding gamification and cultural awareness in English teaching. Through a semi-structured format, the teacher shared her views on resources and tools used in the classroom, strategies for sustaining motivation, the diversity of learning styles, and the need for additional training. This instrument provided insights into the pedagogical realities and institutional constraints, while also highlighting the teacher's agency and willingness to implement innovative methodologies (see annex 3).

Didactic sequence (Pedagogical Proposal)

The didactic sequence, entitled “*Magical World of English: Learning through Adventure*” was designed and implemented as a gamified teaching strategy. Structured around missions, roles, and playful challenges, it aimed to foster English language skills while promoting cultural awareness. Students assumed roles such as explorers or astronauts, engaging in activities that combined vocabulary learning, oral practice, and cultural content. This instrument functioned as both an intervention and a means to validate how gamification can create meaningful, motivating, and inclusive learning experiences in the first-grade classroom (see annex 9).

Observation guide

The structured observation was carried out during the implementation of the didactic sequence. It enabled the systematic recording of students’ participation, motivation, interaction in English, and responses to gamified activities. Teachers used the guide to assess students’ progress in vocabulary acquisition, oral practice, and cultural awareness, while also noting behavioral aspects such as collaboration, discipline, and enthusiasm. This instrument provided direct evidence of the impact of gamification on classroom dynamics, complementing the information gathered from the focus group and the teacher interview through methodological triangulation (see annex 10).

Instruments

Table 3.

Objectives and instruments.

Objectives	Technique	Instrument
To examine the cultural and contextual factors that influence the relationship between gamification, cultural awareness, and English language learning in first-grade students.	Semi-structured interview	Question script
To design a didactic sequence grounded in gamification principles that integrates cultural	Document analysis	Bibliographic file

elements into the process of English language acquisition.		
To reflect on the contributions of the gamified didactic sequence to students' participation, motivation, and development of cultural awareness.	Structured observation	Observation Guide
<i>Note.</i> Own elaboration		

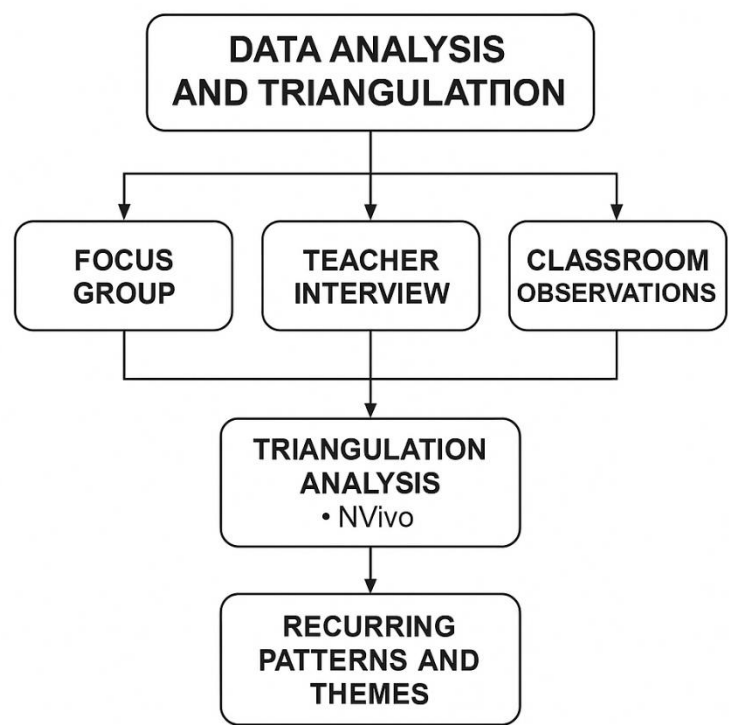
Ethical considerations

This study adhered strictly to ethical standards by obtaining informed consent from parents or legal guardians, ensuring the anonymity of participants, and safeguarding the confidentiality of all collected data. All activities were designed to be developmentally appropriate, prioritizing the emotional and psychological well-being of the children involved. The research process guaranteed the fair selection of participants and upheld principles of scientific integrity, including the proper acknowledgment of prior research contributions. To ensure methodological rigor, the instruments used focus group, teacher interview, didactic sequence, and observation guide were validated by experts in education and research methodology, confirming their relevance, clarity, and alignment with the study’s objectives. Every effort was made to minimize bias in both data collection and analysis, thereby ensuring that the findings accurately reflect the participants’ experiences while respecting their rights and dignity.

Data analysis and triangulation

The study employed a triangulation strategy to evaluate the effectiveness of gamification in fostering cultural awareness, drawing on the model proposed by Cistern (2005). This methodological approach entailed the systematic comparison and cross-referencing of data obtained from multiple sources, thereby enabling a comprehensive and multidimensional understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Figure 6.
Data Analysis and Triangulation Process.



Note. Own elaboration supported by AI.

To ensure analytical rigor, NVivo software specialized tool for qualitative data analysis was used to organize, code, and interpret the information collected from the focus group, teacher interview, and classroom observations. This process facilitated the identification of recurring patterns, emergent themes, and critical connections between gamified methodologies and students’ cultural awareness. The integration of triangulation with NVivo not only strengthened the validity and reliability of the findings but also allowed for a nuanced interpretation of the data, thereby reinforcing the evaluation of the pedagogical impacts of gamification in the classroom context.

Considering the following image (see figure 3), which is the word cloud, Terms related to teaching, learning, and the use of innovative pedagogical strategies are highlighted, particularly in the context of English as a foreign language. The most prominent term is "students," which demonstrates that the main focus of the reflection revolves around students, that is, the central role they play in the learning process. This centrality coincides with current educational trends that promote a student-centered model, where the teacher acts more as a guide or facilitator than as a simple transmitter of content.

Another key aspect observed is the strong presence of words such as “activities”,

“learning”, “practice”, “questions” and “gamified”. This suggests the relevance of gamification as a teaching strategy, understood as the incorporation of game elements (missions, rewards, teams, challenges) into the academic environment. Gamification transforms classroom dynamics into a motivating environment that fosters active participation, cooperation, and meaningful learning. Thus, terms like “mission,” “rewards,” “team,” and “points” reinforce the idea that education should not only be a process of knowledge acquisition, but also a fun and emotionally enriching experience.

The cloud also shows a strong emphasis on collaborative work, expressed in words like “groups,” “team,” “classmates,” “pairs,” and “organized.” These references highlight the importance of social interaction in the construction of knowledge. Cooperative learning not only improves content comprehension but also develops soft skills such as communication, empathy, and problem-solving. Furthermore, the inclusion of terms like “cultural awareness” and “respect” indicates that educational activities must transcend the purely academic to develop conscious, critical, and respectful citizens of cultural diversity.

Finally, it is worth noting the presence of terms linked to creativity and motivation, such as “adventure,” “explorers,” “magical,” “futuristic,” “imagination,” and “fun.” These concepts suggest that education should inspire students to view learning as an exciting journey, filled with challenges and discoveries. In this sense, teaching English, as a global language, is presented not only as an academic requirement, but as a gateway to new experiences, cultures, and opportunities.

Figure 7.

Word cloud.



Categorization

Table 4.
Coding process and emergent categories

					generates meaningful learning.
Classroom Climate and Relationships		Positive school environment	Favorable school climate		A positive environment and a close relationship with the teacher foster student motivation and commitment.
		Teacher-student relationship	Motivation and pedagogical bond		
Learning Processes and Cognitive Development		Diversity and learning styles	Cognitive diversity and learning styles		Recognizing diversity and integrating cultural awareness enhance English learning in inclusive settings.
		Linguistic and cultural development	Cultural and linguistic awareness		
Pedagogical Strategies and Resources		Didactic and assessment resources	Pedagogical and technological tools		Didactic resources and continuous teacher training foster innovation in educational practice and address students' needs.
		Teacher training and reflection	Teacher professional development		

Note. Own elaboration

The didactic sequence presented in the "Teaching Guide is executed strategically, that is, favoring the learning of the English language in students in the first year of primary education with a gamified approach that favors active participation and the development of communication skills in a cultural context. Gamification serves as a common thread as it motivates students and makes the development of the learning process more attractive. A mission was developed for each of the units that the students have to carry out, receiving the attention of the students and making the experience of language development also be lived as playful and reducing the anxiety already often associated with learning a new language and favoring a more conducive environment.

The structure of each unit is clear and defined. Start the game with an introduction to place an attractive narrative context: for example, in the unit "What's your name?" the students are astronauts, calling on their imagination and linking learning to exciting adventures. In addition, specific instructions, points and rewards system are defined for each activity, establishing a clear frame of reference, when not, playing to maintain order and from here teach

the importance of following the instructions within the framework of a learning community.

In the end, the evaluation in this sequence of activity is continuous and, in essence, formative, since the activities that are carried out will be evaluated through rubrics and self-evaluation, encouraging the students themselves to make an analysis of their learning process. Not only does it serve to improve the weaknesses detected in learning, but what is sought is that the students themselves become aware of their learning process, which we reserve for the evaluation what we store in the memory, generates the interest in doing it, and also makes the students gradually assume responsibility for their own learning. And in this way, the didactic sequence in the "Teaching Guide" is proposed as a global model, with a good integration of the elements of gamification, structure, interactive activities and formative assessment, which serves for the learning of a language such as English in a way that is not only effective, but also meaningful.

Didactic sequence structure

This teaching unit is designed as a gamified journey where students take on different roles and narrative contexts to strengthen their English learning in a playful and meaningful way. Each session presents scenarios that stimulate imagination, integrate cultural elements, and encourage active participation, teamwork, and autonomy. The structure is organized around missions, rewards, and progressive challenges that allow students to experience learning as a continuous adventure.

Tabla 5.

Didactic sequence structure.

Un it	Main Topic	Student Role/Cont ext	Game Dynamics	Performance Objective	Types of Activities	Achievement/Re ward System
1	Personal Introducti ons	Astronauts on a space mission	Planet journeys with character creation and challenges	Ask and answer basic identity questions	Memory games, character creation, group collage	Stars collected in an astronaut log
2	Greetings and Farewells	Travelers through magical	Exploratio n of different	Recognize and use greetings/fare	Puzzles, cultural role-plays,	Globes stamped in a futuristic passport

		portals	countries and cultural practices	wells in various contexts	bingo	
3	Commands and Instructions	Circus performers	Role-play with circus-themed activities	Understand and follow affirmative and negative commands	Song-based actions, Twister, flashcards, guessing games	Clown faces
4	Numbers and Colors	Explorers in an escape room	Puzzle-solving with key challenges	Identify numbers 1–10 and basic colors in English	Storytelling, pair competitions, running games	Keys to unlock the escape room
5	Classroom Objects	Word hunters	Treasure hunt in the classroom	Name and ask questions about school objects	Guessing games, flashcards, crossword puzzles	Stars and treasure chest prizes
6	Body Parts	Medical explorers	Health-related exploration and creative posters	Identify body parts and relate them to healthy habits	“Simon Says,” patient brochures, personal posters	Hearts
7	Animals and Habitats	Nature explorers	Discovering animals and their environments	Identify animals and describe basic characteristics	Flashcards, puzzles, role-play, ball game, mask creation	Magnifying glasses in an explorer’s journal

Note. Own elaboration

In summary, the methodology used in this research work is based on a qualitative and descriptive design that articulates gamification as a basic pedagogical strategy. Not only is it an improvement in the teaching of English to first grade students, but it also promotes cultural sensitivity or the active involvement of students in their learning, etc. To carry out this, a planned use is made of the sequence of didactic practice and triangulation instruments such as discussion

groups, interviews or observation guides, which make the analysis of the findings more enriched and valid. In short, research formulated within a framework of reflective action research becomes the opportunity for teachers to reformulate and adapt their pedagogical practice to respond to the demands of students and the school context. Likewise, this research not only accounts for the effects of gamification on language acquisition, but will also mean pedagogical adjustments conducive to inclusive and culturally sensitive learning that contributes to the formation of critical citizens who respect cultural diversity from an early age.

Findings and discussion

The findings of this research shed light on how gamification, when combined with cultural awareness, can transform English language learning in the early grades. The analysis of interviews, focus groups, classroom observations, and the implementation of the didactic sequence allowed the identification of key themes that illustrate both the opportunities and challenges of introducing playful and culturally contextualized methodologies. Far from being a simple motivational resource, gamification emerged as a comprehensive pedagogical strategy capable of fostering student engagement, reducing learning anxiety, and promoting respect for cultural diversity. This section discusses the results by organizing them into four emergent categories, inclusive and active methodologies, classroom climate and relationships, learning processes and cognitive development, and pedagogical strategies and resources, each of which reflects the interconnection between student experiences, teacher practices, and the broader educational context.

Category 1. Inclusive and Active Methodologies

One of the most significant findings of this study is the way students conceptualize learning through play, revealing gamification as an inclusive and active methodology that extends beyond mere entertainment. Data from the focus group indicated that children perceived games as a natural and accessible way to learn English, reducing the stress typically associated with foreign language learning. As one student expressed during the focus group: *“I like when we play because I learn English words without noticing, it is fun and easy.”* This perception demonstrates that gamification is internalized by students as a strategy that facilitates oral expression, vocabulary acquisition, and pronunciation practice, all within a context of enjoyment

and spontaneity (see annex 9).

Gamification and playful learning

The subcategory of gamification and playful learning emerged as a central aspect of the students' experiences. Both the focus group and classroom observations highlighted a strong preference for interactive activities such as competitions, storytelling, and role-playing, which allowed learners to practice English in a safe and motivating environment. One student pointed out in the focus group: *"Games help us remember the words, and we can talk in English without being afraid."* These findings resonate with Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which emphasizes that low-anxiety conditions are essential for language acquisition. By embedding playful elements into the didactic sequence, students felt motivated to take communicative risks, thereby reinforcing their speaking, listening, and comprehension skills (see annex 9).

Use of technological tools

The subcategory of use of technological tools reflects both the potential and the limitations of the school context. Evidence from the classroom observations revealed that although the institution had limited technological infrastructure, the teacher maximized available resources such as flashcards, posters, audios, and videos to sustain students' attention. The teacher interview confirmed this reality when she stated: *"We do not have many technological resources, but with what we have, I try to keep their attention."* (see annex 9). This adaptive use of resources underscores the teacher's creativity in transforming minimal materials into learning opportunities. Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory supports this finding, suggesting that tools whether digital or analog mediate cognitive processes by linking abstract concepts with concrete, culturally contextualized practices.

The convergence of data from the focus group, interview, and observations suggests that gamification and technological mediation promote inclusion by allowing all students, regardless of their learning styles, to participate actively. This reinforces the constructivist perspective (Piaget, 1972; Bruner, 1997), which argues that learning becomes meaningful when children build knowledge through interaction, play, and exploration. In this case, gamification not only enhanced linguistic skills but also encouraged intercultural awareness, as students began to recognize cultural elements embedded in stories and games.

Nevertheless, the findings also raise a critical reflection: while gamification proved effective in engaging students, its long-term sustainability depends on two factors continuous teacher training in innovative pedagogies and the systematic provision of technological resources. Without these conditions, gamification risks being reduced to sporadic activities rather than a consolidated methodological strategy. Thus, this category highlights the dual reality of the context: on one hand, the promise of gamification as a powerful inclusive tool, and on the other, the institutional barriers that threaten its consistent implementation.

Category 2. Classroom climate and relationships

The category of classroom climate and relationships revealed that students' motivation and willingness to participate were directly linked to the atmosphere created in the classroom and to the teacher-student relationship. The data collected through the focus group showed that students valued the affective dimension of learning as much as the cognitive one. One participant explained: "*When the teacher smiles and says we are doing well; I want to keep trying in English.*" Such expressions highlight that recognition and encouragement contribute to building trust, which in turn fosters greater participation (see annex 9).

Positive school climate

Evidence from the classroom observations confirmed that students demonstrated higher levels of engagement in sessions where humor, games, and collaborative activities were included. The observer noted that "*during group competitions, students encouraged one another, applauded when peers answered, and showed excitement to participate.*" This reflects how a positive school climate not only reduces anxiety but also transforms the classroom into a cooperative space. Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis already established the role of emotional states in language learning, but more recent research reinforces this point. For instance, Dewaele and Li (2020) show that positive emotions such as joy and pride significantly predict language learners' willingness to communicate. Similarly, MacIntyre et al. (2021) argue that positive psychology in SLA (Second Language Acquisition) highlights the importance of cultivating enjoyment to strengthen resilience and engagement in the classroom (see annex 9)..

Teacher-student relationship

The teacher interview revealed the educator's awareness of her role in shaping the learning environment: *"If I show interest and energy, they immediately respond. My motivation reflects on them."* (see annex 9). This perspective underscores the relational and affective dimension of pedagogy, where the teacher's behavior functions as a model for student disposition. The findings resonate with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, where learning emerges from interaction within the Zone of Proximal Development, but also with contemporary discussions. For example, Mercer and Gregersen (2020) emphasize that teacher-student rapport directly impacts motivation and persistence, while Wang et al. (2022) found that teacher support fosters academic resilience in early language learners.

The triangulation of the focus group, interview, and observations demonstrates that the classroom climate and teacher-student relationship operate as powerful enablers of English learning. Students feel validated and motivated when their efforts are recognized, when the environment is collaborative, and when the teacher projects enthusiasm. This aligns with the perspective of Positive Psychology in language education, which suggests that fostering well-being in the classroom enhances not only cognitive outcomes but also socio-emotional growth (MacIntyre & Mercer, 2019).

However, the findings also raise a critical reflection, while gamification and cultural activities created favorable climates, these depended heavily on the teacher's disposition. If teacher motivation decreases, the positive climate may also deteriorate, revealing a structural vulnerability. Thus, strengthening institutional support for teachers through training, collaborative networks, and recognition becomes essential to ensure that positive classroom climates are sustainable rather than circumstantial.

Category 3. Learning processes and cognitive development

This category highlights how diversity in learning styles and the integration of cultural awareness shape the way students engage with English in the early grades. Evidence from the teacher interview showed an explicit recognition of the heterogeneity of the group *"Some children learn very quickly with songs, while others need to see the words or repeat them many times. I have to adapt constantly."* This acknowledgment illustrates the need for differentiated strategies that respond to cognitive rhythms and learning preferences (see annex 9).

Diversity and Learning Styles

The focus group confirmed these differences, as one student explained: *“I like when we draw and write because it helps me remember,”* while another responded: *“I prefer when we play or move because I don’t get bored.”* These contrasting voices reveal the coexistence of visual, kinesthetic, and auditory learning preferences. Classroom observations supported this pattern, noting that during a storytelling activity, some students engaged more actively when drawing characters, while others preferred acting them out. This reflects the necessity of inclusive methodologies that address multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2011). Recent research strengthens this point: Liyanage et al. (2019) argue that tailoring instruction to diverse learning styles increases student autonomy, while Oxford (2020) suggests that strategic use of multimodal activities in language teaching fosters more equitable participation (see annex 9).

Linguistic and cultural development

Another significant subcategory concerns linguistic and cultural development. Students connected English learning not only to words and grammar but also to cultural symbols embedded in the games and narratives. During the focus group, one child mentioned: *“I like when we learn how kids say hello in other countries; it feels like we are there.”* (see annex 9). This shows that gamified activities extended beyond linguistic practice to foster intercultural awareness. Observations further confirmed that when cultural content was included such as songs, greetings, or symbols from English-speaking countries students displayed excitement and curiosity, often repeating the expressions spontaneously. These findings align with Byram’s (1997) concept of intercultural communicative competence and are echoed by more recent studies. For instance, Young and Sachdev (2021) highlight that embedding cultural elements in early language education enhances both motivation and empathy, while Lee & Chen (2023) demonstrate that gamified cultural tasks promote openness and critical thinking in multicultural classrooms.

The triangulation of instruments suggests that cognitive and linguistic development in young learners benefit significantly when diversity is acknowledged and when culture is integrated into language instruction. Constructivist perspectives (Piaget, 1972; Bruner, 1997) already argued that learning occurs most effectively when tied to meaningful experiences.

Contemporary perspectives reaffirm this, Dörnyei and Henry (2021) argue that inclusive, culturally grounded pedagogy sustains motivation by linking linguistic goals to personal and social identities.

Nevertheless, the findings also raise a challenge. While gamification proved effective in engaging students with different learning styles, the institutional capacity to provide differentiated materials and cultural resources remains limited. Without sustained support, teachers risk over-relying on generic strategies that may not meet all learners' needs. Therefore, the evidence underscores the importance of designing culturally responsive curricula and offering professional development that equips teachers with tools to address cognitive diversity and foster intercultural learning simultaneously.

Category 4. Pedagogical strategies and resources

This category reveals how the availability of resources and the teacher's professional development shaped the effectiveness of the gamified didactic sequence. Evidence from the teacher interview underscored the material constraints of the institution: "*We do not have many technological resources, but I try to create materials or adapt what I have to make the class engaging.*" (see annex 9). This demonstrates both the limitations imposed by the lack of infrastructure and the teacher's agency in overcoming them through creativity and adaptation.

Didactic and assessment resources

The classroom observations confirmed that the teacher relied heavily on low-cost didactic materials such as flashcards, posters, and songs to deliver lessons. During one session, students showed high enthusiasm when using handmade cards to match vocabulary with images, which promoted meaningful associations. Similarly, in assessment activities, playful strategies such as group competitions were employed to evaluate progress. A student in the focus group reflected positively on this approach: "*I like when we win stars because it feels like we are learning and playing at the same time.*" (see annex 9). These findings resonate with Bruner's (1997) notion of scaffolding, where learning is supported through tools that guide students' discovery. More recent scholarship supports this dynamic, Shatto and Erwin (2021) argue that integrating playful assessment fosters continuous feedback and motivates learners, while Kim and Lee (2022) highlight that multimodal resources in gamified environments enhance knowledge retention and

inclusivity.

Teacher training and reflection

Another relevant subcategory concerns teacher training and reflection. In the interview, the teacher admitted: “*I feel I need more training in gamification and English to improve what I can do with them.*” (see annex 9). This statement underscores the necessity of continuous professional development to ensure the effective implementation of innovative pedagogies. Without adequate preparation, teachers may not be able to maximize the potential of gamification or integrate cultural content meaningfully. Vygotsky’s sociocultural framework emphasizes the teacher’s role as mediator of learning, while recent research highlights professional development as a determining factor. For instance, Mercer and Kostoulas (2020) argue that reflective teacher education empowers educators to create positive learning ecologies, and Chou & Feng (2023) show that training in gamified methodologies directly impacts classroom engagement and intercultural outcomes.

The triangulation of the interview, focus group, and observation findings confirms that pedagogical strategies and resources are central to sustaining inclusive and gamified methodologies. On the one hand, the creative use of didactic tools demonstrates that even in resource-limited settings, teachers can design meaningful learning experiences. On the other hand, the absence of systemic support both in infrastructure and professional training poses a barrier to consolidating these practices. This duality reflects what Dörnyei and Ushioda (2021) describe as the tension between teacher agency and institutional constraints in language education.

Therefore, the results suggest that while gamification and resource adaptation enable positive learning outcomes, they cannot depend solely on teacher effort. Institutional policies must ensure access to adequate teaching materials, digital tools, and ongoing professional development. Without these supports, pedagogical innovation risks becoming fragmented and unsustainable, limiting its transformative potential in early language education.

The analysis of findings across the four emergent categories demonstrates that gamification, when combined with cultural awareness, reconfigures English teaching in early grades into a holistic and transformative process. Each category reveals complementary dimensions of this transformation. Inclusive and Active Methodologies show that games and

technological mediation engage students by lowering anxiety and fostering active participation. Classroom Climate and Relationships confirm that a positive environment, sustained by teacher motivation and rapport, is a determinant of student willingness to communicate and persist in learning. Learning Processes and Cognitive Development highlight the need to address diverse learning styles while embedding cultural content that broadens linguistic practice and nurtures intercultural awareness. Finally, Pedagogical Strategies and Resources expose both the creative potential of teachers to adapt materials and the institutional challenges that must be addressed to sustain innovation.

Taken together, the findings validate gamification not as an isolated strategy, but as a pedagogical axis that connects methodologies, relationships, cognitive development, and resources in a single framework. The triangulation of focus group data, classroom observations, and teacher interviews underscores that when children perceive learning as playful, inclusive, and culturally relevant, they become more confident, collaborative, and motivated to use English in authentic contexts. This resonates with contemporary research in Second Language Acquisition (MacIntyre & Mercer, 2019; Dewaele & Li, 2020; Lee & Chen, 2023), which emphasizes the interplay of affective, cognitive, and cultural factors in fostering meaningful learning.

Nevertheless, the discussion also reveals a tension between teacher agency and institutional limitations. While teachers' creativity and commitment enable the implementation of gamified strategies, structural barriers such as limited technological resources and insufficient training threaten the continuity and scalability of these practices. This finding suggests that the sustainability of gamification in language education requires not only individual effort but also systemic support through resource provision, curricular integration, and professional development opportunities.

Conclusions

The implementation of the didactic sequence “*Magical World of English: Learning through Adventure*” demonstrated that gamification is a powerful pedagogical strategy for fostering English language learning and cultural awareness in first-grade students. The analysis of data obtained through the focus group, teacher interview, and classroom observations allowed the consolidation of four emergent categories that explain the process in depth.

First, Inclusive and Active Methodologies proved to be fundamental for promoting meaningful participation. Students associated games with fun and learning, highlighting that gamified activities facilitated vocabulary acquisition, oral practice, and pronunciation in natural contexts. The integration of technological and didactic tools, even under resource constraints, enriched classroom dynamics and confirmed that inclusive methodologies reduce anxiety and foster confidence.

Second, Classroom Climate and Relationships emerged as a decisive factor in the effectiveness of gamification. Students emphasized that respect, encouragement, and teacher support made them feel secure and motivated, while observations showed that humor and collaboration reinforced a positive learning environment. This demonstrates that gamification works best when mediated by strong teacher-student relationships and a favorable emotional climate.

Third, Learning Processes and Cognitive Development highlighted the diversity of learning styles among first graders and the importance of integrating cultural content into English teaching. Students revealed different preferences, some learning more through drawing, others through movement or songs but all valued games as vehicles for active learning. Likewise, cultural awareness emerged as a transversal axis, as children recognized greetings, traditions, and symbols from other cultures, fostering respect and openness to diversity from an early age.

Finally, Pedagogical Strategies and Resources exposed both the creative capacity of the teacher to adapt materials and the institutional limitations that restricted the full potential of gamification. Despite the scarcity of technological resources, strategies such as flashcards, songs, and playful assessments kept students engaged. However, the teacher's testimony highlighted the need for greater training in innovative methodologies and better resource provision to guarantee sustainable implementation.

The study concludes that gamification, when designed with cultural awareness and adapted to diverse learning needs, transforms the classroom into a participatory, inclusive, and motivating space. Its effectiveness lies in connecting language learning with students' emotions, cultural experiences, and collaborative practices. However, its long-term consolidation requires systemic institutional support in terms of training, resources, and curricular integration.

Recommendations

Considering the findings of this research, it is recommended that teachers continue to design and implement gamified strategies that incorporate cultural content and that adapt to the diversity of learning styles present in first grade. These strategies should promote participation, collaboration, and creativity, allowing children to approach English not as an imposition but as a meaningful and enjoyable experience. At the same time, teachers are encouraged to strengthen their reflective practices to evaluate the effectiveness of gamification and adjust their methodologies according to the specific needs of their students. Professional development opportunities in gamification, intercultural education, and the use of digital tools should be actively pursued to expand their methodological repertoire.

For educational institutions, it is essential to provide teachers with adequate technological and didactic resources that allow gamification to be sustained beyond isolated initiatives. The acquisition of projectors, computers, and interactive platforms, together with the provision of materials such as flashcards, stories, and multimedia resources, would significantly enrich the teaching-learning process. Similarly, the inclusion of continuous training programs on innovative pedagogies and intercultural approaches would help ensure the sustainability of these practices. It is also necessary that institutions formally integrate gamification and cultural awareness into their curricula so that they become part of the institutional culture and not occasional practices dependent on individual teacher initiative.

At the policy level, educational authorities should promote bilingual education policies that recognize gamification as a methodological alternative to strengthen foreign language learning in early grades. The establishment of alliances with universities, cultural centers, and international organizations would facilitate the provision of resources, specialized training, and opportunities for cultural exchange that would enhance the impact of gamification. In addition, policies should aim to guarantee equal access to technological resources in schools, particularly in contexts with economic limitations, so that gamification can become an inclusive practice.

Finally, for future research it is recommended to extend the implementation of gamification to other grade levels to compare its effects at different stages of development. It would also be valuable to investigate its impact on specific linguistic skills such as reading and writing, which complement oral practice. Likewise, studies that explore the role of families in gamified processes could provide relevant insights to strengthen cultural awareness and extend the benefits of gamification beyond the school context.

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Annexes

[Annex 1. Letter of validation of the instrument.](#)

[Annex 2. Parental Consent for the Focus Group](#)

[Annex 3. Authorization for Request for Interview](#)

[Annex 4. Request for authorization the rectory](#)

[Annex 5. Focus group questionnaire.](#)

[Annex 6. Interview questionnaire with the teacher](#)

[Annex 7. Outcomes of the clusters](#)

[Annex 8. Photographic record](#)

[Annex 9. Didactic sequence.](#)

[Annex 10. Observation guide.](#)

[Annex 11. Observation Guides Implemented Units of the Didactic Sequence](#)