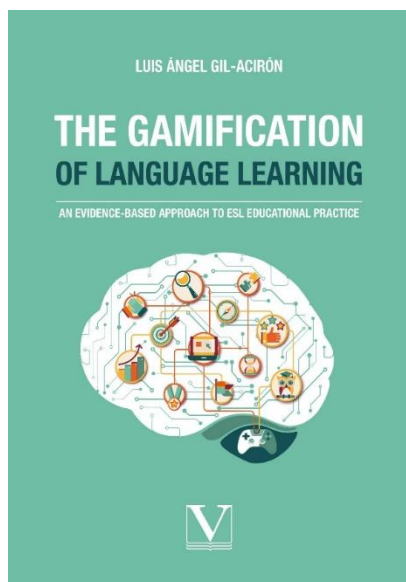


BOOK REVIEW

Gil-Acirón, L. Á. (2025). *The Gamification of Language Learning: An Evidence-Based Approach to ESL Educational Practice*. Editorial Verbum. 342 pp. ISBN: 978-84-1136-811-7

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Luis Ángel Gil-Acirón's *The Gamification of Language Learning: An Evidence-Based Approach to ESL Educational Practice*, a book that has been recipient of the academic award V Premio de Investigación Filológica "Profesor José Romera Castillo", represents a significant scholarly contribution to the intersecting fields of second language acquisition, educational technology, and pedagogical innovation. Published by Editorial Verbum in 2025, this volume addresses a critical gap in educational research by investigating how systematically designed gamification principles can enhance the learning experiences of newcomer English Language Learners (ELLs) in the United States, specifically examining the impact on affective factors that influence language acquisition success.

The work emerges from Gil-Acirón's three-year experience as a participating teacher in the Spanish Ministry of Education's Visiting Teachers in the USA and Canada program, working with newcomer students at Buchanan Elementary School in Oklahoma City Public Schools. The author documents how 62.9% of the school's 676 students are ELLs, with 83% being economically disadvantaged, and many having experienced traumatic migration journeys. This contextualization establishes both the humanitarian urgency and pedagogical significance of the research, positioning the study within frameworks of educational equity and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 on Quality Education.

Gil-Acirón's central hypothesis posits that newcomer ELL students' affective filters, encompassing motivation, self-confidence, and anxiety, can be lowered through co-designed language learning gamification experiences in the ESL classroom. The theoretical foundation rests primarily on Stephen Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, which suggests that emotional factors act as barriers or facilitators to language input reaching the Language Acquisition Device. The study's innovative contribution lies in its rigorous empirical examination of how "Class Royale (ESL Edition)", a co-designed gamification program adapted from the popular mobile phone video game *Clash Royale* (2016), impacts these affective dimensions. As Pilar Rodríguez Arancón notes in the foreword, this work stands as "a beacon of innovation and compassion" (Gil-Acirón, 2025, p. 17) by integrating theoretical sophistication with profound empathy for vulnerable student populations.

The monograph is structured in seven chapters organized into four distinctive blocks corresponding to classic research phases: contextualization and theoretical framework (Chapters 1-3), methodology (Chapter 4), results and discussion (Chapters 5-6), and conclusions (Chapter 7).

Chapter 1: Introduction establishes the problem statement, documenting the complex circumstances facing newcomer ELL students who often arrive in the United States undocumented, economically disadvantaged, and having endured traumatic experiences including loss of relatives or detention in Immigration Detention Centers. Gil-Acirón articulates the study's significance in relation to Sustainable Development Goals, specifically targeting Goal 4's aims to "eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable" (UNDP, 2015a, Goal 4 Targets, para. 5) and to "provide safe, nonviolent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all" (UNDP, 2015a, Goal 4 Targets, para. 8). The chapter clearly defines the research hypothesis and two primary objectives: to co-design with students a language learning gamification program, and to apply and evaluate this program's impact on newcomer ELL students' affective filters.

Chapter 2: English Language Learners and Affective Factors provides a comprehensive contextualization of ELL students in the United States, detailing federal definitions, legal frameworks (including the Civil Rights Act of 1964, *Lau v. Nichols* 1974, and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001), and Oklahoma City Public Schools' English Language Development Program. Gil-Acirón documents specific barriers facing newcomers: linguistic challenges including extended silent periods, difficulty catching up with content-area learning, and the 4-7 years typically required for ELLs to reach academic language proficiency. The chapter's second section offers extensive theoretical review of affective factors in second language acquisition, examining Krashen's Monitor Model hypotheses, Gardner and Lambert's integrative versus instrumental motivation, Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System, and theories addressing self-confidence and language anxiety. Significantly, Gil-Acirón incorporates discussion of cultural perspectives on motivation, recognizing Western versus Eastern conceptualizations relevant to his diverse student population. The chapter concludes with evidence-based pedagogical strategies for lowering affective filters, including techniques specific to newcomer students.

Chapter 3: Gamification constitutes the study's most extensive chapter, providing thorough theoretical grounding in gamification fundamentals. Gil-Acirón carefully distinguishes gamification from related concepts including Game-Based Learning, serious games, and simulations, defining gamification as the application of game design elements in non-game contexts. The chapter systematically catalogues gamification elements using multiple taxonomies, including Werbach and Hunter's hierarchy of game dynamics, mechanics, and components, and explores game design principles such as Freytag's Pyramid, the Hero's Journey narrative structure, and Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory. A particularly sophisticated section examines gamer psychology through multiple frameworks: personality traits using the Five-Factor Model, Bartle's player types, Yee's player motivations, and Marczewski's User Type Hexad. Gil-Acirón incorporates cutting-edge neuroscience research, discussing how gamification activates reward systems through neurotransmitters (dopamine, oxytocin, serotonin, and endorphins) and presenting functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) studies demonstrating gamification's effects on the Default Mode Network and Working Memory Network. The chapter concludes by reviewing gamification applications in education generally and second language learning specifically, addressing vocabulary and grammar learning, skills development, soft skills, and assessment.

Chapter 4: Research Methodology develops the mixed-methods cross-sectional experimental design employed to investigate the research questions. Gil-Acirón describes the 24 participating newcomer students (10 first graders, 6 second graders, and 8 fourth, fifth and sixth graders; 22 Hispanic and 2 Vietnamese; 12 male and 12 female). The co-design methodology follows Huang and Soman's five-step educational gamification model: understanding the target audience, defining learning objectives, structuring the experience, identifying resources, and applying gamification elements. Data collection employed triangulation of three techniques: pre-test and post-test surveys using the validated Student Motivational State Questionnaire developed by Guilloteaux and Dörnyei, systematic classroom observations utilizing the Learners' Motivated Behavior Observation Scheme, and focus group discussions. The chapter demonstrates methodological sophistication in addressing ethical considerations for research with vulnerable child populations, including informed consent procedures and provision of materials in participants' native languages (Spanish and Vietnamese).

Chapter 5: Gamification Program Co-Design documents the systematic development and implementation of Class Royale (ESL Edition). Through student surveys identifying *Clash Royale* as the most popular video game, Gil-Acirón and his students collaboratively adapted game elements to educational contexts. The program structure incorporated game mechanics aligned with learning objectives: "Gems" (points) awarded for language skill development, "Arenas" corresponding to didactic units, "Chests" representing behavior and language skills with five-lesson didactic units, "Cards" as rewards with special privileges, "Experience Levels" tracking reward collection, "Battles" as activities designed according to Gardner's Multiple Intelligences theory, "Tournaments" as tests, "Class Market" as temporary reward offerings, and "Grand Challenge" as surprise projects. Gil-Acirón designed a comprehensive visual identity including a website, an infographic poster, classroom displays, and physical cards, ensuring the gamification experience was immersive and professionally executed. Prototype testing with students validated the program design before full implementation.

Chapter 6: Gamification Program Implementation, Results and Discussion presents empirical findings from the 20-week implementation period. Statistical analysis using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test for questionnaire data revealed significant improvements across all three affective factors: motivation items showed 8.5% to 150% increases (with reverse-coded items appropriately interpreted), self-confidence items demonstrated 9.6% to 161.1% gains, and anxiety items indicated 11.1% to 292.9% reductions. Results stratified by age group and gender showed consistent patterns, though with some variation in magnitude. Observational data analyzed using Two-Proportions Z-Test confirmed increased behavioral engagement, with students displaying greater attention, active participation, and eager volunteering during gamified versus non-gamified sessions. Focus group discussions provided rich qualitative data illuminating students' perspectives on how Class Royale (ESL Edition) influenced their learning experiences, with students articulating awareness of the program's impact on their willingness to take linguistic risks and their reduced anxiety about making mistakes.

Gil-Acirón's concluding chapter synthesizes major findings while maintaining scholarly humility about the study's limitations. The research successfully validated the hypothesis that co-designed gamification programs can lower newcomer ELL students' affective filters, with empirical evidence demonstrating improvements in motivation, self-confidence, and reductions in anxiety. The author emphasizes that successful gamification requires more than superficial application of game elements; rather, it demands systematic design grounded in learning theory, meaningful alignment between game mechanics and educational objectives, and genuine student participation in the co-design process.

Pedagogical implications articulated by Gil-Acirón include recommendations that ESL teachers consider gamification as a viable strategy for creating engaging, supportive learning environments that address the emotional needs of vulnerable student populations. The study demonstrates how gamification can provide frequent personalized feedback, create low-stakes contexts for practicing language skills, facilitate social learning through collaborative game mechanics, and transform potentially anxiety-inducing tasks into motivating challenges. Gil-Acirón argues that the co-design methodology was particularly crucial, since involving students as active participants rather than passive recipients honored principles of autonomy and intrinsic motivation central to Self-Determination Theory.

The author candidly acknowledges several limitations that appropriately contextualize the findings. The sample size of 24 students, while adequate for action research, limits generalizability to broader populations. The specific context, newcomer ELLs at a single elementary school, means results may not transfer directly to other settings with different demographic compositions or institutional structures. The 20-week duration, while substantial, raises questions about long-term sustainability of motivational improvements. Gil-Acirón notes the challenge of isolating gamification effects from confounding variables such as novelty effect or researcher enthusiasm, though the triangulation of data sources partially addresses this concern. Importantly, the study focused on affective factors rather than directly measuring language proficiency gains, leaving open questions about whether increased motivation translates into measurable linguistic development.

Gil-Acirón proposes judicious directions for future research that would significantly advance the field. These include longitudinal studies examining sustained effects of gamification on both affective factors and language proficiency outcomes, comparative studies investigating different gamification design types, research examining how cultural factors and individual differences moderate gamification effectiveness, exploration of the relationship between gamification and quality teaching practices, and investigation of scaling possibilities beyond individual classrooms to institutional or district levels. The author's suggestion to study other teachers' experiences implementing Class Royale (ESL Edition) reflects commitment to ensuring the program's replicability and wider applicability.

References

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