

Developing children and young people's Estonian as a second language speaking skills through gamified active learning

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Summary

Estonian as a second language is essential for individuals and the entire Estonian state (Ehala & Koreinik, 2016; Riigikogu, 2018). However, we are currently in a situation where about half of the students who take the Estonian as a second language exam at the end of basic school cannot achieve the B1 level after nine years of study (Eksamite Infosüsteem, 2025). The problem is often explained by the students' lack of motivation to learn Estonian and the lack of a language environment (Klaas-Lang, 2023; Klaas-Lang & Praakli, 2015; Metslang et al., 2013). In 2024, Estonian schools began a gradual transition to whole Estonian-language teaching. However, this might not improve the situation, because if students cannot speak sufficiently in class, their speaking skills will not develop. Poor speaking skills can also begin to hinder the learning of other subjects. Therefore, increasing the level of students' Estonian speaking skills is urgently necessary. This requires developing a methodology for teaching speaking skills to increase students' desire to speak and develop their speaking skills more effectively than before. One option for developing learning methodologies is gamified active learning.

The article discusses a study in which 60 students of Narva College, University of Tartu, specialising in Estonian as a second language teachers, tested gamified learning activities learned in the teaching methodology classes in two different academic years (2023/24, 2024/25) and described their experiments in written homework. The study analysed the students' experiences and observations, seeking answers to the following questions:

1. What factors did the students notice to encourage speaking when conducting gamified speaking activities with preschool and basic school students?

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2. What characteristics characterising the development of speaking skills did the students notice during the speaking activities with preschool and basic school students?

The research material was the students' written homework. The students chose and tested three of the gamified speaking tasks they had learned in the course. For each test, they wrote a description according to the points given by the lecturer: the purpose of the activity, changes during the testing, the activity's success, the interest and usefulness of the activity for the learners, and the skills developed during the activity. The students' homework has been studied using inductive content analysis.

The gamified speaking activities were divided into simpler and more complex ones. The simpler activities aimed to tune the learners to Estonian, practice the vocabulary, grammatical structures, and language functions necessary for speaking, and create a favourable mood and energy for learning. In these activities, the participants said words, phrases, and short sentences that required limited improvisation. Of the simpler activities, the five for which students submitted the most homework were selected for study. The more complex types of gamified speaking activities aimed to develop free speaking skills and required learners to create improvised stories and hold improvised dialogues. Unlike the simpler activities, these activities required longer and more complex improvisation, communication, and story building. Three of the more complex tasks were selected for study, for which more homework assignments were submitted.

Five categories of factors that create the desire to speak emerged in the analysis: emotions associated with the activity, the affordability of learning activities, active participation, the interest in learning activities, and communication with peers.

The positive emotions associated with gamification emerged most clearly in the teachers' descriptions. They were present in 66% of the descriptions. This is not surprising, as the induction of positive emotions is one of the important features of the gamified learning method (Gaudart, 2009; Macedonia, 2005; Schwartz, 2020). Many (43% of the descriptions studied) of the learners' activity while doing gamified activities also emerged in this study, including physical and speaking activities. Active language use is necessary for developing speaking skills (Larsen-Freeman, 2011; Swain, 1993). However, learners often cannot and do not want to talk enough in lessons (Bernhardt & Meristo, 2023; Ellis, 2003; Metslang et al., 2013; Kitsnik, 2018). It is not always easy to induce activity even with active learning methods, which is why gamification has great potential here.

This study also revealed the importance of the affordability of gamified learning activities (49% of the descriptions studied were positive and 23% were negative). The success of the activities and the affordability of the activities for learners were often mentioned. However, affordability was the main category that appeared in this study, in addition to positive observations, quite often in a negative way. In this case, the learning activity was too complex for the group and did not create a desire to talk. Building accessible learning is mainly the task of the teacher, who must select learning activities according to the level of his or her learning group and support the learners to the appropriate extent.

In this study, the interestingness of the learning activities and the interaction between the learners also emerged to some extent from the students' descriptions. The students mentioned interestingness the most in the descriptions of creating improvised stories. Regarding communication, it was repeatedly mentioned how the classroom atmosphere was friendly during the gamified activities and how the learners' cooperation skills developed.

The characteristics of speaking skills were divided into six categories: vocabulary development, general skills development, communication skills development, listening skills development, self-confidence growth, and creativity development. Vocabulary development was most noticeable, mainly observed in the simpler activities. To achieve the automaticity of free speech (Hinkel, 2017), do tasks where you can talk a lot (Adams, 2018; Ellis, 2003; Eskildsen, 2008; Kubanyiova, 2018). In this study, students mainly mentioned more complex activities, such as developing communication skills. The increase in learners' self-confidence was also observed. Gamified activities encouraged most students to take action and reduced their fear of using Estonian.

The first limitation of the study is the lack of control groups. Therefore, it is impossible to compare which factors trigger the desire to speak and which signs of speaking skill development the students would have noticed in speaking lessons conducted with a different methodology. The second limitation is that the students were not asked whether they noticed specific factors or characteristics. Therefore, some of the factors and characteristics that occurred in the lessons may not have been recorded. However, this study focused on what the students noticed without direct guidance. Another limitation is that the development of speaking skills was not measured in this study, but was assessed only based on the students' descriptions. In the future, it would be worth investigating the effect of gamified speaking activities using control groups and objectively measuring the development of speaking skills.

Based on this study, it can be concluded that if gamified activities are well selected and implemented, they are successful with most teachers and learners. This is the most significant value of the study. Gamified speaking activities

create a desire to speak in learners and make children and young people who otherwise do not want to do so speak. Gamified activities also develop speaking skills. Simpler learning activities are suitable for preparing for speaking, and more complex speaking activities are suitable for developing the ability to speak freely. The value of the study is also the clarification of the factors and characteristics associated with gamified speaking activities.

Keywords: second language teaching, gamified learning, desire to speak, speaking skills, Estonian language