Gamification in ELT: Balancing Academic Rigor and Soft Skills

by [Katie Welch](#)

A common concern when teaching high school and college English learners (ELs) is how much students' grades should reflect mastery of the content as compared to their work habits, professionalism, and effort. For instance, teachers often grapple with whether students should be penalized for turning in a late assignment even though they demonstrated complete knowledge of the content. Conversely, they may wonder: If timely assignment submission is *not* reinforced, am I adequately preparing students for success in the professional world? This problem is compounded when we consider that some ELs possess limited or interrupted formal education and are likely unfamiliar with K–12 school routines and expectations. Likewise, many college ELs are unaware of the "hidden curriculum" in higher education, which is heavily composed of soft skills, such as knowing how to ask a professor for an extension on an assignment.

Gamification, the process of applying video game principles to educational contexts, offers a solution that enables instructors to maintain rigor while simultaneously fostering soft skill development. Whether you are a hardcore gamer yourself or a complete gaming newbie (like me), your classroom can still benefit from gamification. Following, I outline my own experience of gamifying a university course as I sought to combat engagement challenges, such as spotty attendance, reluctant participation, and assignment procrastination. By implementing a gamified "bonus level" in the course, I was able to reimagine the traditional notion of "extra credit" in a way that incentivized strong work habits without creating a high amount of grade inflation in the process.

What Is Gamification?

When we hear about gamification in educational contexts, typically this means that certain elements common to video game design have been adapted and incorporated into the classroom experience. After all, don't we all wish our students were as addicted to their coursework as they are to popular video games, such as Minecraft, Farmville, and World of Warcraft? Gamers love these games not only because they immerse the player into a fantasy world, but also because of the built-in incentives that keep the player engaged. For example:

- **Easter eggs** are hidden elements within a video game that are not always immediately obvious to the player and therefore must be "hunted" for, similar to the more traditional Easter egg hunt where children search for literal hidden eggs.

- **Badges** that players earn as they accomplish skills or meet goals are another incentive for gamers, as well as opportunities to **level up** after meeting specified criteria.
- **Leaderboards** are another common gaming element; they allow players to see how they are performing compared to their peers, which stokes competition.

Many educational technology companies have incorporated these gaming elements into their apps, which is why we see tools like Kahoot! using leaderboards to encourage friendly competition among students, and why Duolinguo offers badges when language learners have accomplished a task. In fact, instructors have found gamification to be so useful that an entire platform called Classcraft has been developed that offers teachers a turnkey solution to transform their entire syllabus into a gamified quest, complete with avatars, fantasy worlds, and levels to navigate. In my case, however, I opted for a more DIY approach that, while grounded in gamification fundamentals, did not require any additional technology or software beyond what I was already using.

The Bonus Level

In 2016, after studying the principles of gamification, I decided that I wanted to take on the task of gamifying a college-level course that I had been teaching face-to-face for a number of years but that had recently moved online. Once I realized that the online format didn't have the built-in accountability that a face-to-face format affords, I began researching a way to incentivize students to watch video lectures, complete timely assignment submissions, and participate in discussion boards and other nonmandatory portions of the course. Of course, one common way of accomplishing this goal would be to offer extra credit, but I worried that offering too much extra credit would lead to inflated grades. So, I developed what I call *the bonus level.*

The bonus level was a completely optional component of the course that was revealed to students at the beginning of the fourth week of the semester, after we had gotten settled into the class somewhat. I gave some hints about a big announcement that would be coming in Week 4 to build some anticipation about the soon-to-be-released bonus level. Once the fourth week arrived, I explained to my students that the bonus level was a game that they could opt into at any point throughout the semester so they could start earning tickets.

Earning Tickets and Prizes

The tickets were completely virtual and would be tracked in a Google spreadsheet that they could access at any time to see how many tickets they had accrued, who was currently ahead in the class leaderboard, and what prizes they could earn with their tickets. (I was happy to discover that Google Sheets has a built-in, easy-to-use widget that auto-generates a leaderboard in a matter of minutes!)

To earn tickets, students could participate in a variety of gamified activities, such as the following:

1. **Easter Eggs:** Every few weeks, I would hide an image somewhere within that week's online module. The image was a clickable link that led to a Google form. Students knew

ahead of time what types of image to be looking for, and I would usually send out an announcement letting them know an Easter egg would be posted sometime soon. This encouraged students to read each page of the online module closely and not simply skip through to the assessment.

2. **Scrabble Letters:** To encourage students to watch video lectures and announcements, I would randomly share a scrabble letter at some point throughout every video. Students were encouraged to keep track of these letters. At the end of the semester, they unscrambled the letters to reveal a hidden message related to our course. Students submitted their discovery on a Google form and earned tickets for their correct answer.

3. **Early Assignment Submission:** Our course had reoccurring assignment deadlines each week, and the bonus level offered students an opportunity to earn tickets if they submitted an assignment more than 24 hours in advance of those deadlines. Because the learning management system time-stamped every assignment, I could quickly award tickets for anyone who submitted assignments early. This incentive kept many students from waiting until the last minute to turn in assignments.

4. **Other Opportunities:** I offered tickets for other aspects of course engagement, such as attending a guest lecture, commenting on classmates' posts, or participating in an end-of-course survey. The flexibility to add opportunities meant I could adjust the bonus level as needs arose.

In any gamified situation, the goal is to have gamers so immersed in the narrative of the fantasy world that they are no longer thinking about the real world. This phenomenon is what allowed me to give out so many tickets without awarding a prohibitive amount of extra credit. Students would get so involved in the "game" of finding hidden messages and seeing their name on the leaderboard that they were no longer as interested in the actual prizes they were working toward. This is similar to how children at an arcade love the process of collecting all the tickets that the machines spit out even while knowing that they will likely cash in those tickets for a cheap trinket or token.

Though most of the students did ultimately redeem their tickets for a prize of their choice, the prizes—which ranged from resubmitting a missed assignment to dropping their lowest quiz grade—were equivalent to less than one percentage point of their final grade. This meant that I could add any number of ticket-earning opportunities to reinforce soft skills without worrying that I was unduly influencing their grades.

Developing Soft Skills

Another benefit of gamification is that it creates a safety net for students who might need an alternative path to course completion. I work primarily with first-generation college freshmen,
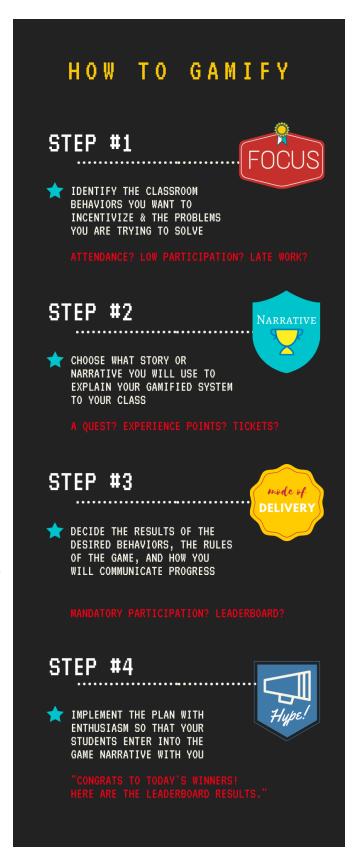
some of whom are not fully prepared for the rigor of a university classroom. I typically have a handful of students who find themselves contemplating withdrawal because they have had a rough start to the course. These students often don't opt-in to the bonus level initially but are later relieved to learn that it offers redemption opportunities, such as resubmitting low-grade assignments.

For students to earn the required tickets to resubmit an assignment, they must start engaging in the healthy habits built into the gamified system, such as participating in course discussions or attending office hours for tutoring. Thus, the bonus level becomes a win-win, as I can maintain the expectation that all students perform at the required level of academic rigor while simultaneously providing the support they need to do so. Plus, the soft skills they learn along the way should position students for success in future coursework as well.

A Quick-Start Guide to Course Gamification

If you are interested in trying out gamification in your own course, regardless of whether you use a ready-made program like Classcraft or create your own version like I did, here are some key steps you'll want to follow to ensure that your efforts are successful (see Figure 1 for a graphic outlining these steps):

> **Step 1:** Identify the classroom behaviors you want to incentivize and the problems you are trying to solve. Are you struggling with attendance? Late work? Lack of communication? Start by making a broad wish list and then pinpoint two to three top priority issues.

HOW TO GAMIFY

STEP #1 — FOCUS

IDENTIFY THE CLASSROOM BEHAVIORS YOU WANT TO INCENTIVIZE & THE PROBLEMS YOU ARE TRYING TO SOLVE

ATTENDANCE? LOW PARTICIPATION? LATE WORK?

STEP #2 — NARRATIVE

CHOOSE WHAT STORY OR NARRATIVE YOU WILL USE TO EXPLAIN YOUR GAMIFIED SYSTEM TO YOUR CLASS

A QUEST? EXPERIENCE POINTS? TICKETS?

STEP #3 — mode of DELIVERY

DECIDE THE RESULTS OF THE DESIRED BEHAVIORS, THE RULES OF THE GAME, AND HOW YOU WILL COMMUNICATE PROGRESS

MANDATORY PARTICIPATION? LEADERBOARD?

STEP #4 — Hype!

IMPLEMENT THE PLAN WITH ENTHUSIASM SO THAT YOUR STUDENTS ENTER INTO THE GAME NARRATIVE WITH YOU

"CONGRATS TO TODAY'S WINNERS! HERE ARE THE LEADERBOARD RESULTS."

Step 2: Choose what story or narrative you will use to explain your gamified system to your class. Students must "buy in" to the world you create, even if it's something as simple as a bonus level with electronic tickets. (Don't skip this step, it's actually the most important part of the process!)

Step 3: Decide the results of the desired behaviors, the rules of the game, and how you will communicate progress. Give some thought to how you want to organize your gamified classroom and then test out your plan to ensure you aren't overloading yourself with lots of new tasks or accidentally overwhelming students with a confusing system. Start small and communicate clearly.

Step 4: Implement the plan with enthusiasm so that your students enter into the game narrative with you. Gamification is a game, after all, so the goal is to have fun! Set the tone for your class by creating some anticipation and "hype" around game elements and events.

Overall, gamifying my class was worth the initial time investment to set it up, especially since I have continued to use the same system in many subsequent semesters. It was a rewarding and fun experience for both myself and my students.

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Dr. Katie Welch, an active contributor in the ESL community, currently serves as past president of TexTESOLV, an affiliate of TESOL International Association that serves the Dallas-Fort Worth region of Texas. She led the Board of Directors as conference chair of the 2018 state conference and has presented at numerous conferences nationwide. Katie has amassed a lengthy dossier in preparing ESL teachers for both adult and K–12 classrooms, most recently completing 7 years at the Emerging Teacher Institute at UNT-Dallas.