

Exploring Chinese Elementary Teachers' Perceptions and Implementations of Gamification in Online EFL Classrooms

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Abstract

This study investigates Chinese elementary teachers' perceptions and implementations of gamification in online English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected through a questionnaire (N = 140) and semi-structured interviews (N = 7). Teachers' perceptions of gamification were analyzed across three dimensions: technological, cognitive, and pedagogical. Technologically, the results revealed that most teachers perceived gamification tools on the ClassIn platform as user-friendly and engaging, although limited in variety. Cognitively, teachers recognized gamification's potential to enhance motivation and engagement, but expressed concerns about its potential to distract students. Pedagogically, while gamification was perceived as a complement to traditional teaching methods and a means to foster student-centered learning, it posed challenges such as increased workload and difficulties aligning activities with academic goals. Regarding implementation, gamification was most frequently used in vocabulary and reading activities, whereas its use in writing and listening activities was limited due to higher cognitive demands. Key challenges included managing students' negative emotions from competition, addressing parental skepticism, overcoming technical and classroom management barriers, allocating sufficient time for effective implementation, and adapting gamification tools to diverse student needs. Key factors shaping implementation included student characteristics and content suitability. The results emphasize the need for tailored professional development, adaptive gamification strategies, and institutional support to maximize the benefits of gamification while addressing its challenges. This study offers actionable insights for enhancing teaching practices and improving student engagement in online EFL classrooms.

Keywords: gamification, EFL, Chinese elementary teachers, online education, ClassIn

1. Introduction

The integration of technology into education has revolutionized traditional teaching approaches, particularly in online learning environments. As part of this shift, gamification has emerged as a promising pedagogical tool, leveraging game-like elements to create more engaging and dynamic learning experiences (Deterding et al., 2011). This is particularly relevant in online English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, where maintaining student engagement and enhancing motivation is often challenging.

In China, the education system, which strongly emphasizes academic achievement and exam performance, presents gamification with a unique opportunity and challenge. On the one hand, gamification offers an innovative, interactive alternative to traditional rote memorization and teacher-centered methods, providing students with a more engaging learning experience. On the other hand, integrating gamification into such a structured, exam-focused system poses significant challenges, requiring teachers to balance the benefits of gamification with the need to meet academic objectives and maintain educational rigor.

Teachers' perceptions play a crucial role in determining the successful implementation of gamification in classrooms (Luo et al., 2021). Teachers' perceptions regarding its usefulness, ease of integration, and alignment with educational goals can influence how effectively gamification is applied. Positive perceptions can drive creative and consistent use of gamification, while negative perceptions may limit its implementation. For Chinese elementary teachers navigating online EFL instruction, these perceptions are critical, as they must simultaneously adapt to emerging technologies and address institutional expectations.

While gamification has gained popularity in educational research, significant gaps remain in understanding how elementary-level teachers in China perceive and implement gamification, especially in the context of online EFL classrooms. Most existing studies focus on secondary or higher education or on students' perceptions (Zhang & Hasim, 2023), overlooking the crucial role of teachers in shaping gamified learning experiences. Additionally, the unique challenges posed by China's exam-oriented system remain underexplored, leaving a gap in identifying teachers' perceptions and practical implementations of gamification in this context.

This study aims to bridge these gaps by exploring Chinese elementary teachers' perceptions and implementations regarding gamification in online EFL classrooms. Specifically, it examines how teachers use gamification tools available on platforms like ClassIn to enhance elementary students' engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes. ClassIn, a widely used online teaching platform in China, incorporates key gamification principles such as rewards, competitions, challenges, collaborations, and customized features. It includes gamified elements, such as trophies, polls, timers, leaderboards, dice, quiz buzzers, random selectors, and adaptive features, which help create engaging and interactive learning experiences. By leveraging these gamified elements, teachers can create interactive lessons that align with gamification principles and promote student participation and motivation.

This study investigates how teachers perceive and implement gamification, aiming to provide actionable insights for enhancing the integration of gamification in elementary-level online language education in China, and contributing to the global discourse on technology-enhanced language education. In accordance with these aims, the research objectives of the study are as follows:

- (1) To explore Chinese elementary teachers' perceptions of gamification in online EFL classrooms.
- (2) To examine Chinese elementary teachers' implementations of gamification in online EFL classrooms.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Gamification in Education

Gamification refers to the integration of game-like elements, such as points, badges, leaderboards, challenges, and other game mechanics, into non-game contexts to enhance engagement and learning (Deterding et al., 2011). By transforming passive activities into interactive experiences, gamification aims to foster greater motivation, participation, and learning outcomes, making it a powerful pedagogical tool in modern education. This approach is widely recognized for its ability to improve student engagement and motivation, particularly in online learning environments where maintaining student attention can be challenging.

Online platforms like Kahoot, Duolingo, ClassIn, and Liulishuo leverage game elements to create engaging, interactive learning experiences. These platforms incorporate features such as quizzes, competitive activities, and immediate feedback, which encourage students to actively engage with content and replicate traditional classroom dynamics in virtual environments. This approach is particularly valuable in online education, where face-to-face interaction is limited. Gamification helps combat feelings of isolation and enhances student participation and interest in learning (Sailer & Homner, 2020). For example, ClassIn offers a range of game-like features, including trophies, leaderboards, dice, timers, and quiz buzzers, which not only motivate students but also provide real-time feedback on their progress. These features enhance interactivity, create a more engaging learning environment, and allow teachers to adapt gamification to various teaching styles. The flexibility of these tools supports personalized learning experiences, helping maintain student engagement throughout the learning process.

2.2 Gamification in online EFL Classrooms

In online English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, gamification plays a crucial role in supporting language acquisition, particularly in addressing challenges such as low student engagement and motivation (Zhang & Hasim, 2023). By integrating game-like features such as interactive mini-games, real-time quizzes, and progress tracking, this approach enhances vocabulary retention, reading comprehension, and overall language proficiency (Li & Chu, 2021). Features like immediate feedback and progress tracking empower learners to self-regulate and enhance their autonomy in language acquisition, making gamification a valuable tool in enhancing cognitive engagement. Studies such as Deterding et al. (2011) and Wang & Lieberoth (2016) highlight the relevance of gamification in diverse educational contexts, making these findings highly applicable to online EFL instruction.

However, challenges exist in implementing gamification effectively. An over-reliance on extrinsic motivators, such as rewards, can detract from intrinsic learning goals, leading to superficial engagement and reduced long-term effectiveness (Chan & Lo, 2024). Additionally, leaderboards and competitive elements may

discourage lower-performing students, fostering anxiety or negative competition (Zhang & Hasim, 2023). Teachers often face technical and pedagogical barriers, including insufficient training and difficulty aligning gamified activities with deeper learning tasks (Spathopoulou & Konstantinos, 2024; Luo et al., 2021).

2.3 Teachers' Perceptions of Gamification

2.3.1 Defining Teachers' Perceptions of Gamification

Teachers' perceptions of gamification significantly impact how effectively it is integrated into classrooms. These perceptions can be categorized into three dimensions: technological, cognitive, and pedagogical. The technological dimension focuses on teachers' attitudes toward the usability, functionality, and effectiveness of gamified tools. According to TAM (Technology Acceptance Model), the more teachers perceive these tools as useful and easy to use, the more likely they are to adopt them (Davis, 1989). The cognitive dimension examines how gamification affects students' motivation, engagement, and cognitive processes like attention and retention. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) suggests that gamified activities can either promote intrinsic motivation (e.g., curiosity, autonomy) or rely on extrinsic rewards (e.g., points, badges) (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). The pedagogical dimension focuses on how gamification aligns with teachers' instructional philosophies and goals. Constructivist Learning Theory informs this dimension by suggesting that gamification supports active, student-centered learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

2.3.2 Relevant Studies

Teachers' perceptions of gamification have been explored widely, with studies highlighting both the positive aspects and concerns in educational settings. The ways in which teachers perceive gamification can significantly influence their willingness to adopt these methods in their classrooms. Research suggests that positive perceptions are often linked to increased teacher engagement with gamification, while negative perceptions can create resistance and hinder its integration (Luo et al., 2021).

In general, studies from various contexts have shown that many teachers perceive gamification as an effective tool for increasing student engagement and motivation. For example, Sáez López et al. (2022) found that teachers in primary education expressed positive attitudes toward gamification, noting its potential to enhance student engagement and motivation. This was particularly true for younger students, who are more likely to respond positively to game-like elements. Similarly, Helvich et al. (2024) reported that teachers viewed gamification as a means to create an interactive learning environment, which helped foster student enthusiasm and participation, particularly in subjects like English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

Zhang & Hasim (2023) emphasized that gamification tools such as badges, leaderboards, and progress tracking could significantly enhance student motivation by providing continuous feedback and tangible rewards. These tools, when aligned with learning objectives, were seen as particularly beneficial for tasks that require repetitive practice, such as vocabulary acquisition and grammar exercises. Many teachers reported that gamification encouraged active participation and created a positive classroom atmosphere, fostering collaboration and healthy competition among students.

However, negative perceptions of gamification are also prevalent, particularly in more traditional or exam-oriented educational systems. In countries like China, where academic achievement and exam performance are prioritized, teachers often express concerns that gamification could distract students from serious academic work. Luo et al. (2021) highlighted that some teachers are skeptical about the long-term effectiveness of gamification, fearing that students may focus more on the rewards (e.g., points, badges) than the actual learning process. This concern is supported by Chan & Lo (2022), who found that while gamification could boost short-term engagement, it might not lead to deeper learning, especially when students' intrinsic motivation is overshadowed by external incentives.

Moreover, Spathopoulou & Konstantinos (2024) noted that teachers in Greece, similar to their counterparts in China, were cautious about the implications of gamification on student autonomy. They found that reliance on rewards such as leaderboards could foster a competitive environment that may cause anxiety for some students, especially those who are less academically confident. Teachers also expressed reluctance to fully integrate gamification into their classrooms due to concerns about its alignment with standardized test preparation and academic rigor. Chan & Lo (2022) also reported that teachers often found the time required to design gamified lessons to be a challenge, particularly when they had to balance these activities with the demands of a packed curriculum. In these settings, teachers favored simpler, more time-efficient gamification tools that could be easily integrated into their existing lesson plans.

Furthermore, gamification raises concerns about its impact on educational objectives, particularly in systems focused on exam performance. Chan & Lo (2022) found that teachers often struggled to balance gamified activities with the need to prepare students for high-stakes exams. They noted that while gamification can foster student engagement, it could also lead to superficial learning if not carefully aligned with learning goals.

2.4 Implementation of Gamification in EFL Classrooms

Research has shown that gamification has been widely implemented in various activities that aim to develop EFL learners' language skills, such as writing, reading, speaking, listening, vocabulary and grammar. For speaking skills, tools like voice recognition and interactive dialogues with reward incentives, found in platforms like Duolingo, help build fluency and confidence, providing immediate feedback in a low-pressure environment (Syafrizal et al., 2022; Yang et al., 2019). Listening skills benefit from real-time quizzes and interactive elements, such as those on platforms like Quizizz, which increase engagement and retention (Rivas-García & Magadán-Díaz, 2022). For reading, gamification elements such as digital badges, trophies, and quizzes encourage active participation and improve comprehension by making reading activities more engaging (Li & Chu, 2021). Competitive features, such as leaderboards, have been shown to motivate students to engage more deeply with reading tasks, creating a more dynamic learning experience (Julita, 2023). In writing, gamification is less common due to the need for deep concentration. For vocabulary and grammar, gamification has proven effective, as tools like quizzes, leaderboards, and badges motivate students to engage with repetitive tasks and retain new language structures (Reynolds et al., 2021).

However, previous researchers have identified challenges in implementing gamification in developing various language skills, including an over-reliance on extrinsic rewards, which can shift focus away from the learning process and lead to superficial engagement (Chan & Lo, 2024). Competitive elements, such as leaderboards, may induce anxiety and hinder participation, particularly among lower-performing students (Spathopoulou & Konstantinos, 2024). Additionally, the initial motivational boost from gamification may not be sustained over time, reducing its long-term effectiveness (Chan & Lo, 2022). Moreover, aligning gamified activities with complex tasks like writing and listening remains difficult, as these require deeper cognitive engagement (Luo et al., 2021). Technological barriers, pedagogical challenges, and the increased workload for teachers also hinder effective gamification integration.

2.5 Research Gaps

While the benefits of gamification have been widely studied, most research focuses on secondary and higher education or emphasizes student outcomes (Zhang & Hasim, 2023; Chan & Lo, 2022). The perceptions of elementary-level teachers, particularly in the context of online EFL classrooms in China, remain underexplored. Furthermore, existing studies often overlook the systemic challenges posed by exam-oriented educational environments, which influence teachers' perceptions and implementations of gamification. This study addresses these gaps by examining Chinese elementary EFL teachers' perceptions and implementations of gamification. By focusing on teachers' lived experiences and their use of gamification tools on platforms like ClassIn, this research aims to provide actionable insights for improving the integration of gamification in elementary-level online language education.

3. Method

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach to investigate Chinese elementary EFL teachers' perceptions and implementations of gamification in online classrooms. A combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods was used to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research objectives.

3.1 Participants

Participants were Chinese elementary EFL teachers employed at a private online English learning institute in China that specializes in teaching students aged 6–12 through the ClassIn platform. A purposive sampling strategy was used to ensure the representation of participants with diverse perceptions, teaching experiences, and gamification implementations.

In the quantitative phase, 140 teachers participated in a structured online questionnaire. The sample consisted predominantly of female teachers (76.43%), most of whom held master's degrees (70.71%) and had 1–3 years of online teaching experience. For the qualitative phase, seven teachers were selected from the questionnaire respondents to participate in semi-structured interviews. Selection criteria included their reported use of gamification, perceptions of its effectiveness, and demographic diversity. This ensured the inclusion of both positive and critical perspectives on gamification.

3.2 Instruments

A structured questionnaire with 40 items was designed to gather data on teachers' implementations and perceptions of gamification. It consisted of three parts: (1) Demographics and background information, which collected data on participants' age, gender, educational background, and teaching experience; (2) Implementation of gamification, which assessed the frequency and nature of gamification use, including specific tools and activities; and (3) Teachers' perceptions of gamification, which measured teachers' perceptions across three dimensions: technological (usability and familiarity with gamification tools), cognitive (impacts on student engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes), and pedagogical (alignment with teaching goals and practices). Responses were recorded on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 4 = Strongly Agree).

The semi-structured interviews included 13 open-ended questions designed to explore teachers' implementations, perceptions, and challenges with gamification in greater depth. The questions addressed specific tools and activities used for gamification, challenges encountered during implementation, factors considered, and teachers' beliefs about its benefits and limitations in online EFL settings. Interviews were conducted in Chinese, recorded with participant consent, and transcribed for thematic analysis.

3.3 Data Validity and Reliability

The study's content validity was established through a review by three experts in EFL education and gamification. These experts evaluated the questionnaire items and interview questions for clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research objectives. Their feedback informed revisions to enhance the instruments' accuracy and focus.

A pilot study was conducted among the target population to assess the reliability of the questionnaire. The analysis yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.893, indicating high internal consistency and reliability. This confirmed that the questionnaire is valid and reliable for measuring teachers' perceptions and implementations of gamification in online EFL classrooms.

3.4 Data Analysis and Procedure

The questionnaire was administered through Wenjuanxing, an online survey platform, and received 140 valid responses. Semi-structured interviews were conducted through Tencent Meeting and WeChat Call to accommodate participants' preferences, with each session lasting approximately 30 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed and translated into English for analysis.

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS version 29 to calculate descriptive statistics, such as means, frequencies, percentages, and standard deviations, which provided an overview of teachers' gamification practices and perceptions. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically, identifying patterns and key themes related to teachers' experiences, challenges, and attitudes toward gamification in online EFL settings.

4. Results

4.1 Teachers' Perceptions of Gamification

This section shows the results of teachers' perceptions across three key dimensions: technological, cognitive, and pedagogical. The questionnaire's findings were presented in terms of descriptive statistics, including frequency (F), percentage (P), mean score (M), and standard deviation (SD). Subsequently, the findings from the semi-structured interviews were presented to complement and support the questionnaire's findings.

4.1.1 Teachers' Perceptions of Gamification on the Technological Dimension

Teachers generally perceived gamification tools on ClassIn as user-friendly and beneficial for online EFL teaching (Table 1). Most teachers (72.14%) agreed that the game-like features on ClassIn were well-designed to support interactive learning ($M = 3.10$, $SD = 0.615$), while 75% felt these features enhanced their teaching effectiveness ($M = 3.14$, $SD = 0.483$). Confidence in using gamification tools was high; 64.29% of teachers agreed, and 28.57% strongly agreed, that they felt capable of creating engaging learning experiences ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 0.560$).

Additionally, 74.29% of teachers reported familiarity with these tools ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 0.567$), indicating that most teachers were well-equipped to use gamification effectively in their classrooms. Teachers also appreciated gamification's potential to support monitoring and evaluation, with 72.14% agreeing that it helped assess student performance effectively ($M = 3.11$, $SD = 0.538$).

Despite these strengths, 15% of teachers reported challenges incorporating gamification due to time constraints or technical issues, as reflected in a moderately lower score for this item ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 0.623$). While most teachers rated the tools favorably in surveys, some teachers in semi-structured interviews expressed frustration with the limited options, indicating a desire for a more diverse range of gamification tools and features to better engage students. For instance, Teacher 6 highlighted this limitation by stating, “*The gamification tools on the ClassIn platform are quite limited and repetitive.*” This sentiment was also echoed by Teacher 5, who noted that “*The mini-games can only be controlled by the teacher, which limits students’ involvement.*”

Table 1. Teachers’ Perceptions: Technological Dimension (N= 140)

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	M	SD
1. The game-like elements and features on ClassIn are well-designed to support interactive online EFL learning.	29 (20.71%)	101 (72.14%)	5 (3.57%)	5 (3.57%)	3.10	0.615
2. The game-like elements and features on ClassIn are particularly beneficial for enhancing my teaching.	27 (19.29%)	105 (75%)	8 (5.71%)	0 (0%)	3.14	0.483
3. I am familiar with the game-like elements and features on ClassIn for online teaching.	23 (16.43%)	104 (74.29%)	10 (7.14%)	3 (2.14%)	3.05	0.567
4. I am satisfied with the variety of game-like elements and features on ClassIn to meet my teaching needs.	25 (17.86%)	105 (75%)	9 (6.43%)	1 (0.71%)	3.10	0.513
5. I frequently use various game-like elements and features on ClassIn in my online EFL classes.	26 (18.57%)	99 (70.71%)	13 (9.29%)	2 (1.43%)	3.06	0.578
6. I feel confident using ClassIn’s game-like elements and features to create engaging learning experiences for my students.	40 (28.57%)	90 (64.29%)	10 (7.14%)	0 (0%)	3.21	0.560
7. Game-like elements and features on ClassIn help teachers monitor and evaluate student performance.	28 (20%)	101 (72.14%)	10 (7.14%)	1 (0.71%)	3.11	0.538
8. I find it difficult to incorporate game-like elements and features into my teaching. *	4 (2.86%)	17 (12.14%)	98 (70%)	21 (15%)	2.97	0.623

4.1.2 Teachers’ Perceptions of Gamification on the Cognitive Dimension

Teachers overwhelmingly perceived gamification as an effective tool for enhancing motivation and engagement (Table 2). Most teachers (52.14% agreed, 47.14% strongly agreed) believed that gamification made lessons more dynamic ($M = 3.46$, $SD = 0.541$), while 58.57% strongly agreed that it made lessons more interactive ($M = 3.59$, $SD = 0.494$). Additionally, 65.71% of teachers strongly agreed that gamification increased student participation in class activities ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 0.524$).

Teachers perceived gamification as particularly effective in improving vocabulary retention and understanding, with 43.57% strongly agreeing and 52.14% agreeing ($M = 3.39$, $SD = 0.595$). In contrast, its perceived impact on listening and writing skills was less significant, with only 8.57% strongly agreeing and 77.14% agreeing that gamification improved these skills ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 0.498$). Regarding speaking and reading skills, 10.71% strongly agreed and 82.14% agreed that gamification positively influenced these areas ($M = 3.04$, $SD = 0.423$).

Gamification was also praised for its ability to reduce learning anxiety, with 64.29% of teachers strongly agreeing and 35% agreeing that it created a more relaxing environment conducive to building confidence ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 0.498$). While most teachers (65.71% agreed, 30.71% strongly agreed) felt gamification fostered long-term interest in learning English ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 0.545$), fewer believed it promoted student autonomy in online EFL learning, with only 17.14% strongly agreeing and 64.29% agreeing ($M = 2.96$, $SD = 0.651$).

While quantitative data revealed that teachers felt gamification was somewhat less effective in improving listening and writing skills, the interviews provided specific insights into this phenomenon. Teachers expressed concerns that listening and writing tasks require sustained focus and that gamification might cause distraction or oversimplify language learning. This suggests that while gamification is broadly seen as effective for engagement, its perceived value varies by task type.

Table 2. Teachers' Perceptions: Cognitive Dimension (N= 140)

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	M	SD
1. Gamification enhances students' motivation by making online EFL lessons more dynamic.	66 (47.14%)	73 (52.14%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.71%)	3.46	0.541
2. Gamification enhances students' motivation by making online EFL lessons more interactive.	82 (58.57%)	58 (41.43%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3.59	0.494
3. Students participate more in class activities when gamification is used.	92 (65.71%)	47 (33.57%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.71%)	3.64	0.524
4. Gamification cannot help in maintaining students' attention and focus for a long period during lessons.*	8 (5.71%)	19 (13.57%)	100 (71.43%)	13 (9.29%)	2.84	0.660
5. Gamification positively influences students' long-term interest in learning English.	43 (30.71%)	92 (65.71%)	4 (2.86%)	1 (0.71%)	3.26	0.545
6. Gamification provides timely feedback that helps students improve their performance.	44 (31.43%)	96 (68.57%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3.31	0.466
7. Gamification promotes student autonomy in online EFL learning.	24 (17.14%)	90 (64.29%)	23 (16.43%)	3 (2.14%)	2.96	0.651
8. Gamification creates a relaxing environment that reduces anxiety and builds students' confidence.	90 (64.29%)	49 (35%)	1 (0.71%)	0 (0%)	3.64	0.498
9. Gamification improves students' understanding and retention of vocabulary and grammar.	61 (43.57%)	73 (52.14%)	5 (3.57%)	1 (0.71%)	3.39	0.595
10. Gamification enhances students' speaking and reading skills.	15 (10.71%)	115 (82.14%)	10 (7.14%)	0 (0%)	3.04	0.423
11. Gamification improves students' listening and writing skills.	12 (8.57%)	108 (77.14%)	19 (13.57%)	1 (0.71%)	2.94	0.498

4.1.3 Teachers' Perceptions of Gamification on the Pedagogical Dimension

Teachers viewed gamification as a valuable complement to traditional teaching methods (Table 3). A majority of teachers (62.14% agreed, 37.86% strongly agreed) believed that gamification complemented traditional methods, creating a balanced and engaging online learning environment ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 0.487$). Additionally, 52.86% strongly agreed and 45% agreed that gamification supported personalized learning activities tailored to diverse student needs and language proficiency levels ($M = 3.50$, $SD = 0.569$).

Gamification was also seen as an effective tool for fostering creativity and innovation in lesson planning, with 64.29% strongly agreeing and 34.29% agreeing that it encouraged more creative teaching practices ($M = 3.62$,

SD = 0.543). Teachers also highlighted its ability to promote student-centered approaches in EFL classes (M = 3.16, SD = 0.527). However, gamification was not perceived as significantly reducing teaching workload, as 54.29% of teachers disagreed that it reduced stress or lesson preparation time (M = 2.38, SD = 0.826).

Interviews similarly reflected teachers' appreciation of gamification for fostering innovative lesson planning and meeting diverse student needs. As Teacher 3 noted, "*Gamification allows me to incorporate more interactive and creative methods.*" However, teachers highlighted the increased workload and time constraints involved in setting up gamification tools and managing classrooms, which can reduce actual teaching time and hinder course objectives. Teacher 3 stated, "*Setting up gamification tools takes time, and it may reduce actual teaching time.*" Teachers also expressed challenges in managing students' competitive emotions, with Teacher 1 observing, "*Students who didn't get the chance to answer or lost in competition may have negative feelings or refuse to participate next time.*" Parental concerns were also a challenge; Teacher 2 noted, "*Some parents think gamification is a waste of time, leading to disagreements.*" To optimize gamification's benefits, teachers emphasized the need for continuous professional development and institutional support to address these challenges, including time constraints, classroom control, and engagement issues among older students.

Table 3. Teachers' Perceptions: Pedagogical Dimension (N= 140)

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	M	SD
1. Gamification aligns with my teaching philosophy.	19 (13.57%)	116 (82.86%)	5 (3.57%)	0 (0%)	3.10	0.403
2. Gamification aligns with my instructional goals.	10 (7.14%)	116 (82.86%)	13 (9.29%)	1 (0.71%)	2.96	0.439
3. Gamification complements traditional teaching methods, creating a balanced online learning environment.	53 (37.86%)	87 (62.14%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3.38	0.487
4. Gamification allows me to design personalized activities that meet diverse student needs and language proficiency levels.	74 (52.86%)	63 (45%)	2 (1.43%)	1 (0.71%)	3.50	0.569
5. Gamification helps increase teacher-student interaction and encourages better communication.	57 (40.71%)	83 (59.29%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3.41	0.493
6. Gamification promotes a more student-centered approach in my online EFL classes.	31 (22.14%)	101 (72.14%)	7 (5%)	1 (0.71%)	3.16	0.527
7. Gamification enhances language learning without shifting the focus away from core language objectives.	84 (60%)	54 (38.57%)	2 (1.43%)	0 (0%)	3.59	0.523
8. Gamification encourages innovative lesson planning and more creative teaching practices.	90 (64.29%)	48 (34.29%)	1 (0.71%)	1 (0.71%)	3.62	0.543
9. Gamification reduces my teaching stress and streamlines my teaching workload, including lesson preparation.	17 (12.14%)	33 (23.57%)	76 (54.29%)	14 (10%)	2.38	0.826
10. Regular evaluation of gamification's impact on students' learning enhances my teaching effectiveness.	72 (51.43%)	63 (45%)	4 (2.86%)	1 (0.71%)	3.47	0.593
11. Ongoing professional development and institutional support would enhance my ability in applying gamification.	81 (57.86%)	57 (40.71%)	2 (1.43%)	0 (0%)	3.56	0.526
12. I am willing to continue using gamification in my online EFL classes.	60 (42.86%)	79 (56.43%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.71%)	3.41	0.536
13. I would recommend gamification to other EFL teachers.	57 (40.71%)	82 (58.57%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.71%)	3.39	0.532

4.2 Teachers' Implementations of Gamification

The questionnaire findings were presented in terms of descriptive statistics, including frequency (f) and percentage (%). Subsequently, the findings from the semi-structured interview were analyzed to complement the questionnaire results.

4.2.1 Frequency of Using Gamification

Gamification was widely used by teachers, with 38.57% reporting that they used it sometimes (once or twice a week), 28.57% often (three to five times a week), and 21.44% in every class. A smaller percentage used it rarely (8.57%) or never (2.86%). This demonstrates a high level of acceptance of gamification in online EFL classrooms (Table 4).

Table 4. Gamification Usage Frequency in ClassIn Platform

Frequency of using gamification	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Never	4	2.86
Rarely (less than once a week)	12	8.57
Sometimes (once or twice a week)	54	38.57
Often (three to five times a week)	40	28.57
Always (every class)	30	21.44
Total	140	100

4.2.2 Popular Gamification Tools

Among gamification tools, trophies were the most commonly used (92.14%), followed by timers (76.43%), quiz buzzers (68.57%), and dice (63.57%). Interactive boards were used by 50.71% of teachers. Less commonly used tools included Go game boards (10.71%) and mini-games (5%). In interviews, teachers highlighted that simpler tools, such as trophies and timers, were preferred for their ease of use and effectiveness in engaging students. In contrast, more complex tools were avoided due to time constraints, setup difficulties, and inadequate training. Other tools, such as progress bars and random selectors, were used by 7.14% of teachers to meet specific needs (Table 5).

Table 5. Teachers' Use of Gamification Tools in Online EFL Teaching (N=140)

Gamification tools	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Trophy	129	92.14
Poll	20	14.29
Timer	107	76.43
Quiz buzzer	96	68.57
Dice	89	63.57
Interactive board	71	50.71
Go game board	15	10.71
Mini-games	7	5
Others	10	7.14
None	4	2.86

4.2.3 Activities and Skills Targeted by Gamification

Gamification was primarily implemented for vocabulary (82.86%) and reading (74.29%) activities, where it helped reinforce learning through repetition and immediate feedback. Speaking activities (62.14%) also benefited from gamified tools, which promoted participation and confidence. Teachers reported using random selection and timers to encourage equal participation and set performance-based goals. Grammar activities were gamified by 49.29% of teachers, demonstrating its applicability to tasks that benefit from structured practice and repetition. However, listening (28.57%) and writing (17.14%) tasks saw less frequent use of gamification, as these skills require more sustained focus and cognitive engagement. Teachers integrated gamification selectively

in these areas. For instance, teachers used polls and trophies to gamify listening tasks, offering immediate feedback to assess students' comprehension.

Teachers in the semi-structured interviews noted that activities like writing and listening, which require deep focus and extended processing time, are less suited for gamification. They explained that gamification could disrupt the flow of listening tasks and distract from the writing process. For example, Teacher 2 noted, *“I don't use gamification for listening instruction. I think it could hinder students' deep thinking and disrupt the flow needed for effective listening practice.”* Similarly, Teacher 1 expressed concern about writing tasks, stating, *“I don't use gamification in writing activities because writing requires deep concentration and brainstorming. I worry that gamification would distract students from their work.”* This divergence in tool applicability suggests that gamification may need to be adapted or supplemented to better support the reflective and focused processes required by specific activities (Table 6).

Table 6. The Activities for which Teachers Use Gamification Tools (N=140)

Activities	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Reading	104	74.29
Listening	40	28.57
Speaking	87	62.14
Writing	24	17.14
Vocabulary	116	82.86
Grammar	69	49.29
None	4	2.86

4.2.4 Factors Considered

Teachers' implementation of gamification in online EFL classrooms is influenced by several key factors. Student characteristics play a vital role, as younger students tend to engage more with gamified activities, while older students require more diverse and sophisticated approaches to maintain interest. Content suitability is another critical factor. Chinese elementary teachers noted that gamification works best for vocabulary and reading tasks, which benefit from repetition and immediate feedback, but it is less effective for listening and writing, which demand sustained focus and deeper cognitive effort. Teachers carefully consider these factors to align gamified activities with students' needs and the learning objectives of each task, ensuring that engagement is balanced with educational rigor.

5. Discussion

5.1 Teachers' Perceptions of Gamification

The study reveals that Chinese elementary EFL teachers generally have positive perceptions of gamification across technological, cognitive, and pedagogical dimensions. Teachers felt confident using the user-friendly tools available on ClassIn platform, which supported interactive and dynamic online learning. This aligns with Sánchez-Mena and Martí-Parreño (2017), who emphasize that teachers' technological proficiency and confidence in using gamification tools are critical for successful integration. The high ratings for the perceived effectiveness of gamification tools suggest that these tools are seen as valuable for engaging students and enhancing motivation. This is consistent with previous research highlighting gamification's potential to create more interactive and enjoyable learning environments (Syafrizal et al., 2022). The positive impact on student engagement aligns with studies indicating that gamified environments lead to increased motivation and participation in language learning tasks (Zhang & Hasim, 2023). Furthermore, many teachers perceived that gamification helped maintain student attention, reduce anxiety, and sustain long-term interest in learning English, which mirrors the findings of Al-Harbi and Madini (2024) and Khasawneh et al. (2024).

However, teachers expressed concerns that external rewards, such as trophies and leaderboards, might undermine intrinsic motivation and autonomy. This contrasts with Slamet et al. (2024), who suggest that gamification, when thoughtfully integrated, can support autonomous learning. Teachers also noted that while gamification is viewed as a complement to traditional teaching methods, its integration increases workload, and the range of available gamification tools is limited. This is consistent with Chan and Noble (2022), who found that teachers often experience time constraints when incorporating gamification into lesson plans. Additionally, the more moderate perception of gamification's pedagogical alignment indicates that teachers are cautious about its fit with curriculum goals. Teachers' concerns about maintaining academic rigor while incorporating game-like elements

reflect the challenges of balancing extrinsic rewards with intrinsic motivation. This resonates with studies suggesting that while gamification can increase engagement, it can also raise concerns about its potential to overshadow deeper learning processes (Luo et al., 2021). For teachers, ensuring that gamified elements align with educational objectives remains a key concern, especially in a system focused on academic performance and standardized testing. Furthermore, teachers believed that professional development and institutional support are essential to enhance their ability to effectively implement gamification in their classrooms, supporting the suggestions of Luo et al. (2021).

5.2 Teachers' Implementations of Gamification

Chinese elementary EFL teachers actively implement gamification in their online classrooms, but its variety and extent vary considerably. Teachers primarily rely on simple tools such as trophies, timers, dice, and buzzers, which enhance student engagement and motivation and provide immediate feedback. However, the study revealed a limited use of more complex gamification tools like mini-games and Go game boards, largely due to time constraints, technical challenges, and a lack of training. This preference for simpler tools is also consistent with Chan and Noble (2022) and Luo et al. (2021), who found that teachers prioritize time-efficient, easy-to-implement tools that align with curriculum demands.

Regarding the implementation of gamification in language activities, teachers noted that gamification works well for activities like vocabulary acquisition, reading and speaking, but is less frequently implemented in writing and listening instruction. This finding is in line with Hanus and Fox (2015), who suggested that complex cognitive tasks, such as writing and listening, may not benefit from the fast-paced, reward-oriented nature of gamification elements. Additionally, the implementation of gamification also involves various factors such as student characteristics and content suitability. Chinese elementary teachers consider student characteristics, such as age and personality, when selecting gamification tools. Young students tend to respond more positively to game-like elements, which aligns with Sailer and Homner (2020). Teachers also ensure that gamification tools are aligned with specific content and learning objectives, such as reading comprehension, a strategy supported by Julita (2023).

However, teachers face challenges when implementing gamification, including managing students' competitive emotions, which can be counterproductive for some learners (Deterding et al., 2011). Time constraints also make it difficult to adequately prepare and integrate gamified activities, a concern also noted by Chan and Noble (2022). Moreover, some parents express skepticism about gamification, viewing it as a distraction from language learning, especially in contexts where traditional methods are more highly valued (Xie et al., 2021). Finally, while gamification is well received by younger students, some teachers noted that older elementary students may find certain gamified activities less engaging, a challenge that highlights the importance of adapting gamification tools to different developmental stages. Additionally, classroom management in online settings poses difficulties, but specific gamification tools, such as random selectors, were found to help mitigate students' off-task behavior, highlighting a pedagogical benefit of gamification that is less emphasized in previous research.

5.3 Pedagogical Implications

The study offers several practical implications for effectively implementing gamification in online EFL classrooms. First, teachers should align gamified activities with specific language learning objectives, ensuring they complement academic goals while maintaining student engagement. Learning activities like vocabulary acquisition and grammar practice, which benefit from repetition and feedback, are particularly suited for gamification. However, for more complex learning activities like writing and listening, innovative adaptations are necessary to balance engagement with cognitive demands.

A balanced approach to competition and collaboration is crucial. While competitive elements can motivate some students, they may cause anxiety in others. Teachers should monitor emotional responses and adjust activities to ensure inclusivity. Combining extrinsic rewards with strategies that foster intrinsic motivation, such as curiosity-driven tasks or self-paced challenges, will help sustain long-term interest in language learning.

Teachers should also customize gamification tools to cater to different learning styles, ensuring engagement across diverse students. While gamification can complement traditional teaching methods, it should be used judiciously for more demanding tasks to maintain academic rigor. Teachers need to strike a balance between fostering engagement and meeting curriculum requirements.

Finally, institutional support is vital to reduce barriers and support teachers in refining their implementation of gamification. Ongoing professional development, focusing on creating time-efficient, adaptable gamified activities and leveraging technology, will equip teachers with the tools they need to overcome common

challenges. Access to reliable, diverse gamification tools will also enable teachers to meet the varying needs of students effectively. A collaborative approach involving teachers, parents, and administrators is essential to promote understanding and gain support for gamification, ensuring it aligns with educational objectives and gains broader acceptance.

6. Conclusion

This study examined Chinese elementary EFL teachers' perceptions and implementations of gamification in online classrooms, focusing on the ClassIn platform. The findings reveal that teachers generally view gamification positively across technological, cognitive, and pedagogical dimensions, appreciating its ability to enhance student engagement, motivation, and confidence while fostering a more dynamic and interactive learning environment. Despite these advantages, the study identifies significant challenges that limit the effective implementation of gamification. Teachers highlighted concerns about the alignment of gamified activities with academic goals, particularly within China's exam-oriented educational system. Additionally, the increased workload, limited variety of tools, and technical barriers were frequently cited as obstacles. Furthermore, gamification was most frequently implemented in vocabulary and reading activities, but its implementation in listening and writing activities remains limited due to the cognitive demands of these skills and the potential for distraction. The study also emphasizes the importance of professional development and institutional support in effectively integrating gamification into online EFL teaching.

7. Limitations

Although this study offers valuable insights into teachers' perceptions and implementations of gamification, it has certain limitations. First, the sample size of 140 teachers may not adequately represent the diversity of experiences across all Chinese elementary EFL teachers, and future research could expand the sample to include a broader range of participants from various regions and school types to enhance generalizability. Second, this study focuses only on teachers' perceptions of gamification. Future research could include the perceptions of students and policymakers. Finally, this study relied on self-reported data from teachers, which may not always align with actual classroom implementations. Future research could incorporate observational methods to provide a more comprehensive understanding of gamification's practical implementation.

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