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Combining "Teaching" with "Joy" - Explore the Innovative Approaches of Gamified Teaching in Primary School English Class

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Abstract: This study aims to investigate the current state and underlying reasons for implementing gamified teaching in primary school English instruction, thereby identifying effective approaches and breakthroughs for small-class English classrooms. Gamification, defined as the integration of game-design elements and principles into non-game educational contexts, has gained considerable attention in contemporary pedagogy; however, its practical application in primary-level English language teaching remains insufficiently explored. By examining the status quo, challenges, and strategies of gamified teaching in primary school English classrooms, the study employs a mixed-methods approach encompassing literature review, questionnaire surveys, and semi-structured interviews. Through lesson comparison using different instructional designs, it systematically compares the effectiveness of traditional versus gamified teaching approaches in primary school English classrooms. The results indicate that gamified teaching is significantly underused, with 33.73% of teachers never employing it, largely due to heavy administrative workloads and concerns over classroom discipline. Despite this, 84.55% of students reported enhanced learning motivation, and the experimental gamified lesson yielded notably higher engagement than its traditional counterpart. However, persistent issues remain, including uneven participation, fairness disparities, and the neglect of struggling learners, stemming from insufficient teacher competence in game design. The study concludes that while gamified teaching effectively boosts student engagement and knowledge acquisition, its successful integration demands comprehensive teacher training, institutional support, and a strategic shift toward cooperative game structures to overcome current impediments.

Keywords: gamified teaching; english classroom; primary education; student engagement; instructional design

Received: 03 May 2026

Revised: 25 June 2026

Accepted: 09 July 2026

Published: 15 July 2026



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1. Introduction

With economic, cultural, and social development, China's population growth has shown a declining trend. Recent policy discussions have highlighted the need to adapt educational practices to evolving demographic patterns, including proposals to optimize faculty allocation standards and reduce class sizes in primary and secondary schools. To support smaller class settings, instructional approaches require careful refinement. Gamified teaching has long been a focus of educational research and practice, with game-based learning and educational games generating substantial scholarly interest, practical applications, and pedagogical innovations [1]. This study investigates the current implementation status and underlying factors influencing gamified English instruction in primary schools, aiming to identify effective strategies for enhancing small-class English teaching. Specifically, the study advances three interrelated hypotheses: (H1) gamified teaching is underutilized in primary English classrooms, with teacher-related barriers—such as workload, concerns about classroom management, and insufficient professional development—being the primary constraints; (H2) gamified instruction significantly

enhances student learning motivation and classroom engagement relative to conventional teaching methods; and (H3) the effectiveness of gamified teaching depends critically on the quality of game design—particularly regarding fairness, appropriate challenge level, and integration with classroom routines—and targeted teacher support can meaningfully address existing implementation challenges. These hypotheses are tested through a mixed-method design combining questionnaires, interviews, and comparative lesson analysis, with the goal of developing a comprehensive, pedagogically grounded, and contextually appropriate framework for integrating gamified teaching into primary English education.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Current Research Status on Gamified Teaching Methods in English Education

The development of gamified teaching approaches shows notable differences between international and domestic contexts [1].

Research on educational games outside China began in the early 1980s, initially focusing on skill-training and simulation-based applications. Over time, specialized educational game development enterprises emerged and collaborated closely with schools and educational institutions. Their products received broad recognition from government education authorities, academic research bodies, game designers, subject-matter educators, and other stakeholders in the education sector. Under supportive policy frameworks, interdisciplinary teams—including education specialists, game developers, and classroom teachers—have been formed to design and study gamified learning environments, many of which are now widely integrated into school instruction. In contrast, domestic educational game development remains underexploited due to the relatively conservative nature of China's current pedagogical environment. Presently, mainstream English learning applications prioritize functional utility, while age-appropriate game mechanics designed specifically for younger learners remain limited [2].

The implementation of high-quality gamified English instruction faces challenges related to teacher professional capacity [3].

Current evaluation mechanisms in China's education system continue to place strong emphasis on students' academic performance and college admission outcomes, resulting in considerable workload pressure on teachers [4]. As a result, the pedagogical orientation of the latest iteration of the compulsory education curriculum—centered on cultivating students' motivation for learning and capacity for innovation to support comprehensive personal growth—has encountered practical constraints in classroom application. Additionally, teachers' working hours are heavily occupied by non-instructional responsibilities, diminishing opportunities for reflective practice in daily teaching. Field observations in primary English classrooms indicate that some educators, oriented primarily toward examination preparation, demonstrate limited familiarity with foundational principles of gamified instruction and insufficient engagement in reflective teaching practices. These factors collectively hinder the broader integration of gamified strategies in classroom settings.

Student agency is frequently underemphasized in gamified teaching implementations [4].

Analysis of the 2022 Compulsory Education Curriculum Standards highlights that nurturing core competencies requires instructional approaches that position students as active participants in their own learning. Research on child development further underscores that for young learners, everyday experiences constitute meaningful learning opportunities, and learning is inherently experiential—a characteristic deeply relevant to language acquisition. Yet many primary school students in China display limited initiative in their studies. When instruction relies predominantly on passive knowledge transmission, it may inadvertently reinforce dependency and constrain creative thinking [1]. Within this framework, students often internalize classroom activities as tasks to be completed under teacher direction rather than as opportunities for autonomous

engagement. Consequently, in current elementary English instruction, learners typically assume a passive stance during lessons.

2.2. Strategies for Gamified Teaching of English Language in Primary Schools

Governmental bodies have consistently supported the development of gamified learning methodologies [1].

As a pioneer in national educational innovation, the Shanghai Municipal Education Commission and relevant educational authorities held a bidding session as early as 2004 under the theme of "Healthy Games," aiming to fund game development for students [4]. National policy documents on further strengthening and improving the ideological and moral development of minors state: "We should actively encourage, guide, and support software development enterprises in creating and promoting game software products that promote national spirit, reflect contemporary characteristics, and benefit the healthy growth of minors."

Extensive research has been conducted on gamified teaching methods in English instruction at primary schools [5].

In the field of English teaching, classroom experiments have been conducted combining the "Magic Little Hero" game with traditional teaching methods to reinforce vocabulary acquisition among elementary students, followed by analysis and summarization of the results. Instructional practices have been implemented using the "Jumping Bear English Word Match" game. An aiming-based mini-game titled "Target Practice Competition" has been employed to assist in teaching English numerals. The implementation of the "immersion-cognition" gamified teaching model and the "game-cognition-context-construction" approach has been explored, creating story-based game scenarios (e.g., "Chickens and Ducks Crossing the River") and organizing activities like "Passing Plates" to teach transitive verbs, intransitive verbs, and the present continuous tense. Gamified teaching has been applied to third-grade English review lessons: using "Show Me..." and "Hide and Seek" to review Unit 1 vocabulary and sentence patterns related to stationery; employing "Keen Eye" and "I Love Bowling" for Unit 2's color-related vocabulary and "I Like..." structures; utilizing "Touch Touch Touch" and "I'm a Little Painter" for Unit 3's body part vocabulary and "This Is My..." phrases; and concluding with three engaging games--- "The Brainiest Brain," "Word Bank," and "Airplane Battle" ---for practical reinforcement. Digital learning platforms have been utilized to motivate students through a comprehensive learning framework. Educational games have been developed using diverse materials such as graphics, text, and music, with findings indicating that students demonstrated high engagement in class and were eager to share their gaming experiences. Game leaderboards have been employed to foster a sense of competition among students.

2.3. Brief Review

Gamified teaching practices in primary and secondary schools have yielded significant research outcomes, offering valuable experience and a solid foundation for this study. However, existing literature predominantly emphasizes applied aspects such as instructional design and methodology, with experimental analyses largely focusing on the positive impacts of game-based English instruction rather than systematic integration [6]. This study therefore addresses three key areas: first, examining the current implementation status of gamified teaching through the lens of elementary students' psychological and physiological characteristics; second, identifying underlying causes of persistent challenges; third, proposing evidence-informed strategies to resolve implementation issues. By conducting a comprehensive and objective investigation into the multifaceted effects of gamified teaching on elementary students' English learning, this study aims to provide theoretical support for its effective application in primary and secondary English classrooms.

3. Research Meaning

3.1. Theoretical Significance

Existing research on gamified English teaching tends to highlight its positive outcomes but lacks systematic theoretical integration. This study systematically classifies gamified pedagogical approaches and comprehensively investigates their implementation pathways and effects within primary school English classrooms, incorporating perspectives from multiple stakeholders [4]. It thereby enriches the theoretical framework and offers foundational support for future scholarly inquiry.

3.2. Policy Significance

In March 2024, an official proposal titled Proposal on Adapting to Population Development Trends and Accelerating the Building of a Strong Teaching Workforce was released, recommending measures to optimize faculty allocation standards and reduce class sizes in primary and secondary schools. Small-class education emphasizes supporting students' individual development, holistic growth, and active participation, strengthening teacher-student interaction, and improving overall instructional quality. Furthermore, national policy guidance highlights the importance of advancing international communication capacity through the systematic development of discourse frameworks and narrative strategies [3]. This underscores the growing demand for high-caliber foreign language professionals. These educational priorities are closely aligned with the pedagogical goals of gamified teaching approaches.

3.3. Practical Significance

Due to the relatively conservative educational climate in China, research on the design of educational games began relatively late, and there remains significant room for development in this area [7]. This study can further advance domestic research on gamified teaching and provide a foundation for subsequent studies. Moreover, gamified English teaching methods can enhance students' vocabulary recognition skills and interest in English learning, while also improving their computer proficiency. Thus, implementing gamified teaching in primary school English classrooms not only helps struggling learners overcome difficulties but also fosters the development of versatile foreign language professionals with cross-cultural communication competencies.

4. Research Content and Issues

Current practices of gamified teaching methods in elementary school English classrooms

Game-based teaching involves integrating games, game elements, concepts, or design principles into instructional practices. This study examines how English teachers with varying levels of teaching experience implement game-based approaches in third-grade primary school classrooms, analyzing three key aspects: the extent of adoption, specific implementation methods, and effects on students' English learning outcomes. Implementation is evaluated across four dimensions: student engagement, appropriate challenge level, classroom discipline alignment, and procedural fairness.

Challenges and underlying factors in game-based teaching for primary school English instruction

This study investigates prevalent challenges and their root causes in game-based teaching, focusing on adoption patterns, equity in implementation, and maintenance of classroom discipline.

Strategic approaches to game-based teaching in primary school English classes

The analysis of potential strategies proceeds along two interrelated dimensions: teacher-level and school-level factors, as well as broader societal influences [8].

5. Research Methods and Process

5.1. Research Technique

5.1.1. Literature Research Method

The literature review method involves systematically collecting, evaluating, and synthesizing scholarly materials to construct a coherent theoretical foundation; it serves

as a key approach for establishing the conceptual framework of this study. This research systematically gathers relevant academic resources from digital databases and institutional library collections, followed by critical screening, thematic organization, and analytical interpretation to develop a robust theoretical framework for gamified instruction in primary school English education [9].

5.1.2. Questionnaire Survey Method

The questionnaire survey method is an investigative approach involving the distribution of pre-designed questionnaires to respondents for completion and subsequent collection, enabling systematic acquisition of research data [10]. This method supports large-scale data collection, facilitates quantitative analysis, and improves research efficiency and reliability. In this study, it is used to identify existing challenges and their root causes in gamified English teaching practices within primary school classrooms, as well as to assess the effectiveness of newly implemented pedagogical innovations. Data are collected from students across four third-grade classes at a participating primary school, focusing on their evaluations of gamified English instruction concerning identified issues and underlying factors. Analytical findings inform the formulation of evidence-based conclusions.

5.1.3. Interview Survey Method

The interview survey method is a research-oriented approach in which investigators collect primary data from participants through oral conversations. This study employs the method to further analyze findings from the questionnaire survey. Owing to its operational simplicity, the interview method serves as an essential tool for exploring underlying causes and generating valuable insights. Interviews were conducted with four third-grade teachers at a single elementary school, yielding conclusions relevant to the research objectives [11].

5.2. Research Process Schedule

5.2.1. Stage 1: Selecting a Research Question

Drawing on research interests and practical requirements, the initial focus was defined as 'Game-based Teaching of English in Primary Schools.' A preliminary literature search using keywords 'gamified teaching' and 'primary school English' enabled refinement of the topic to 'the impact of gamified teaching on primary school students' English learning.' Following critical analysis and an initial literature review, the theme was further revised to 'Innovative Approaches to Gamified Teaching in Primary School English Classrooms' based on expert feedback. A comprehensive analytical framework was then developed by examining the topic from three interrelated dimensions—conceptual foundations, current implementation status, and underlying influencing factors—to identify key issues and establish a coherent research structure.

5.2.2. Stage 2: Reviewing the Literature

A literature search was conducted using the keywords "gamified teaching" and "primary school English" to identify relevant scholarly materials. The retrieved sources were then rigorously screened to exclude low-quality publications, retaining only high-quality, authoritative, and timely resources. These selected works were systematically categorized within the established problem framework and subjected to in-depth thematic analysis, culminating in the synthesis of a comprehensive literature review.

5.2.3. Stage 3: Developing a Research Plan

Drawing on the problem framework and insights from the literature review, research hypotheses were formulated; survey participants were selected; and questionnaires and interview outlines were designed [12]. A pilot survey was administered to a small sample, and the questionnaire was refined based on the feedback obtained.

5.2.4. Stage 4: Collecting and Organizing Information

A questionnaire survey was administered via the Questionnaire Star platform, and structured interviews were conducted according to prearranged schedules with

participants. Audio recording devices or handwritten notes were employed as appropriate during interviews. To ensure data reliability, the questionnaire response rate exceeded 80%, and all completed questionnaires were systematically cataloged for subsequent analysis.

5.2.5. Stage 5: Analyzing the Research Data

After excluding invalid questionnaires, the valid data were subjected to statistical analysis using descriptive statistics, analysis of variance (ANOVA), and regression analysis [12]. Interview records were systematically organized and analyzed through content analysis.

5.2.6. Stage 6: Preparing the Research Report

A research report was prepared based on the survey findings; throughout the writing process, iterative reflection occurred, prompting the identification of new questions, which were subsequently investigated and integrated into a revised version of the report [4].

6. Research Findings

6.1. *The Level of Adoption of Gamified Teaching Methods*

Survey data indicate that among teachers' use of game-based activities in English instruction, the response "occasionally" received the highest proportion at 40.36%, suggesting that most educators integrate such activities to some degree to enhance classroom vitality; "often" accounted for 25.9%, reflecting a notable yet comparatively modest level of consistent implementation, possibly constrained by pedagogical or institutional factors; and "never" was selected by 33.73%, revealing a substantial segment of teachers who do not employ game-based strategies, which may have implications for student motivation and participatory engagement [2].

6.2. *The Specific Implementation of Gamified Teaching Methods*

6.2.1. Interesting

Survey data indicate that game-based activities in English classes are highly engaging for participants: 49.09% rated them as "very interesting" and another 49.09% as "relatively interesting," reflecting overwhelmingly positive perceptions. Only 1.82% described them as "not very interesting," with no respondents selecting "uninteresting."

6.2.2. Challenging

Data analysis indicates that the majority of participants (79.09%) perceived the game as challenging yet achievable, reflecting effective design that sustains engagement and interest. However, 16.36% found it too simple, potentially limiting sustained engagement and long-term appeal. Only 4.55% reported significant difficulty or frequent gameplay obstacles, suggesting an overall well-balanced difficulty level with manageable challenges for most players.

6.2.3. Discipline

Data analysis indicates that the majority of respondents (63.64%) perceive classroom games as having no effect on discipline, while 27.27% report only a minimal effect, suggesting overall maintenance of high disciplinary standards [9]. A minority (9.09%), however, noted a notable effect, confirming that games may influence classroom discipline to a limited degree.

6.2.4. Fairness

According to the data table, participation opportunities in the game vary significantly across different student groups. Specifically, 47.27% of students believe all classmates have equal opportunity to participate, while 35.45% think most students can engage, indicating that the majority of game-based activities provide access for most participants. However, 17.27% perceive participation as limited to a small number of

students, highlighting persistent disparities in equitable access during the implementation of gamified teaching [12].

6.3. The Impact of Gamified Teaching on Students' English Learning

The benefits of classroom games for students are primarily reflected in two aspects: enhancing learning motivation and acquiring classroom knowledge. Among these, the highest proportion (84.55%) relates to boosting learning motivation; 71.82% relate to acquiring classroom knowledge; 60.91% relate to developing collaborative skills; and only 1.82% of students considered classroom games ineffective. This indicates that classroom games effectively stimulate students' interest and engagement in learning, while also supporting knowledge acquisition and fostering teamwork.

6.4. Problems and Causes of Game-Based Teaching in Primary School English Classes

6.4.1. The Use of Gamified Teaching Methods Is Relatively Infrequent

Teacher interviews indicate two principal constraints limiting the adoption of gamified teaching methods: first, substantial administrative responsibilities significantly reduce available time and energy for designing and implementing game-based instructional activities; second, certain educators question the pedagogical necessity of such approaches and express concerns about classroom management challenges during implementation. When thoughtfully designed and appropriately integrated, gamified instruction can meaningfully strengthen student engagement while supporting core language learning objectives. This suggests gaps in professional awareness regarding evidence-informed pedagogical innovation and in the practical competencies required to implement interactive teaching strategies effectively.

6.4.2. Game Design Fails to Take into Account the Needs of Students Who Struggle with Learning

Teacher C identified two primary factors contributing to the limited consideration of students with learning challenges in game design: first, the autonomous nature of gaming activities often fails to sustain motivation for these students in competitive contexts; second, gaps in foundational knowledge hinder their effective participation. These observations suggest that educators require further professional development to strengthen their capacity in designing and implementing inclusive educational games [12].

6.4.3. Game Activities Disrupt Classroom Discipline

As noted in the teacher interview, this issue stems from two interrelated factors: first, a misalignment between the game's interactive design and its pedagogical objectives; second, rule structures that are excessively intricate for students to grasp and apply consistently. This reflects challenges in integrating play-based learning with instructional goals, as well as limitations in the clarity and scaffolding of game instructions.

6.5. Game-Based Teaching Strategies for English Classes in Primary Schools

A comparative study was conducted to examine gamified teaching strategies in primary English classrooms, using the lesson "Unit 4: What Can You Do? Part C -- Story Time" from the PEP Fifth Grade textbook as a case example. In the first lesson, conventional instructional methods were applied throughout; the second lesson embedded instruction within a magical jungle scenario and incorporated classroom games at multiple stages, designed to satisfy four criteria: entertainment value, appropriate challenge level, alignment with classroom discipline expectations, and fairness. During vocabulary introduction, the first lesson relied consistently on the "reading aloud + meaning explanation" approach, whereas the second lesson employed an interactive "magic wand" activity—students clapped rhythmically and chorused target words collectively to reinforce retention [11]. Classroom observations indicated markedly higher student engagement in the gamified lesson. Post-lesson surveys administered to five students revealed that three rated the traditional lesson as "fair" and two as "average," while all five rated the gamified lesson as "excellent." These results suggest that game-

based pedagogy can significantly strengthen learning motivation in primary English instruction (As shown in Table 1).

Table 1. Students' Perspectives on "Different Approaches to the Same Lesson"

Question: How was the class just now?		
First Lesson	Student 1	It feels okay.
	Student 2	same as.
	Student 3	It's just a regular class.
	Student 4	Fair to middling.
	Student 5	Not too bad.
Second Lesson	Student 1	That's great.
	Student 2	Great!
	Student 3	Fine.
	Student 4	So special!
	Student 5	very good!

6.6. Proposal

6.6.1. Promote the Advancement of Teachers' Teaching Philosophies

To foster teaching innovation and advance gamified learning, updating and sharing educational philosophies is a key aspect of teacher development. Schools and education authorities should organize professional training programs and pedagogical research activities, encouraging broad teacher participation; educators should actively adopt evidence-informed teaching methodologies and concepts.

6.6.2. Enhance Teachers' Skills in Game Design

To enhance the fairness, challenge level, and pedagogical rigor of teacher-developed games, designs must be closely aligned with instructional objectives and structured to ensure whole-class participation with clear, accessible rules. Schools and educational authorities can support innovation through gamified teaching evaluations or dedicated game design initiatives. Teachers should conduct systematic student-centered research to ensure games are developmentally appropriate and effectively engage learners.

6.6.3. Enhance Teachers' Instructional Competence

Effective implementation of game-based instructional design requires teachers to possess robust teaching experience and pedagogical competencies. Continuous professional development is essential to strengthen instructional skills, support learners across diverse proficiency levels, and uphold classroom management during gameplay activities. Schools and educational authorities may invite specialized game-based learning practitioners to provide ongoing training and mentorship.

6.6.4. Enhance the Cooperative Aspect of the Game

Social interactivity is a defining feature of educational games, significantly strengthening students' communication and collaborative abilities [5]. In classroom settings where individualized teacher attention is limited, the cooperative structure of games supports peer monitoring and mutual accountability within groups, thereby enhancing instructional effectiveness. Game design should therefore prioritize group dynamics through clearly defined tasks and complementary roles, ensuring equitable participation while cultivating constructive peer engagement.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study investigates the current status, challenges, and implementation strategies of gamified teaching in primary school English classrooms through a mixed-method design. The findings hold both theoretical and practical significance.

Consistent with prior research, this study confirms that gamified teaching enhances student engagement and motivation. However, it also reveals a substantial

implementation gap—many teachers rarely or never employ gamified methods—challenging the overly optimistic portrayal common in existing literature. Moreover, earlier work has largely overlooked the structural impediments affecting successful implementation; this study systematically identifies these factors and situates them within the broader ecological context of teacher professional development and institutional support.

The findings offer actionable guidance for multiple stakeholders: teachers need to strengthen competence in game-based instructional design and classroom management; school administrators should establish supportive structures—including time, resources, and collaborative professional learning opportunities; and policymakers must align curriculum initiatives with sustained capacity-building efforts.

Limitations and future directions. Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study was conducted in a single school with a limited sample size, constraining generalizability; the comparative lesson analysis focused on one instructional unit and did not assess longer-term outcomes; and the data relied primarily on self-report measures. Future research should prioritize large-scale, multi-site surveys; longitudinal designs; experimental studies incorporating objective behavioral or performance metrics; and cross-cultural comparative investigations to further validate and extend the current findings.

In conclusion, the journey toward effective gamified instruction is not merely about integrating games into classrooms but constitutes a systemic endeavor requiring coordinated efforts from teachers, school leaders, and education authorities. By highlighting both progress and persistent challenges, this study contributes to a more balanced and practically grounded understanding of gamified teaching in primary English education.

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