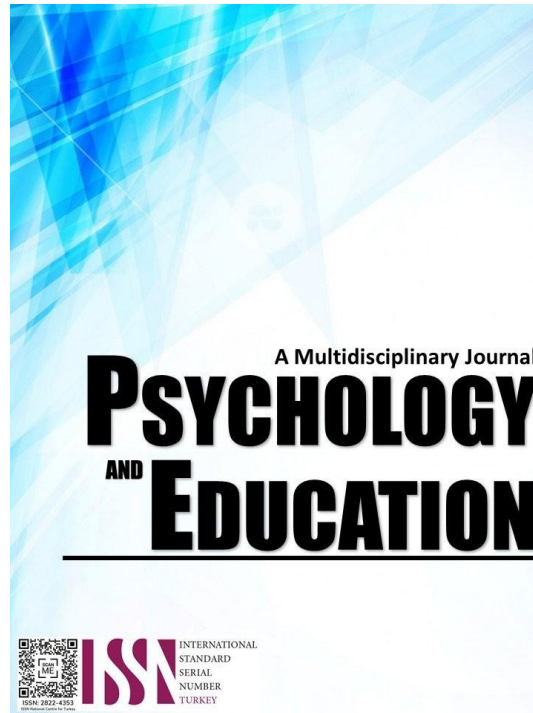


TEACHING READING THROUGH PLAY: A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF TEACHERS' LIVED EXPERIENCES WITH GAMIFICATION FOR STRUGGLING READERS



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Teaching Reading Through Play: A Transcendental Phenomenological Exploration of Teachers' Lived Experiences with Gamification for Struggling Readers

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Abstract

In response to growing concerns about reading difficulties among junior high school learners, educators are exploring innovative strategies to enhance student engagement and reading outcomes. One such strategy is gamification, which incorporates game-like elements to make learning more interactive and enjoyable. Despite its popularity in general education, there is limited research on how teachers actually experience and implement gamification in reading remediation settings. This study addressed the question: What are the lived experiences of English teachers using gamification for struggling readers? Using transcendental phenomenology, this qualitative study explores the lived experiences of five junior high school English teachers from a public high school who have incorporated gamification into their reading remediation classes. Data are gathered through structured interviews, document analysis, and teachers' journals, then analyzed following Moustakas' phenomenological method. Five (5) primary themes emerged: (1) enhanced student engagement, (2) encouraged active and meaningful learning, (3) teachers faced limited resources, (4) required the teachers' creativity, and (5) flexibility and enhanced classroom interaction. Teachers report improved participation and confidence among struggling readers when gamification is applied effectively. This study highlights the transformative potential of gamified reading strategies and recommends greater institutional support and training to optimize their use in remedial instruction.

Keywords: *higher academic institution, job satisfaction, non-teaching, quality of work life, turnover intention*

Introduction

Reading difficulties remain a persistent challenge in junior high school classrooms, as evidenced by the 2024 PISA results, where the Philippines showed a dismal bottom ranking. This indicates that many learners struggled with comprehension, vocabulary, and decoding skills. Furthermore, according to the results of the 2024 Division Reading Assessment Tool (DRAT), the junior public high school where the study was conducted identified thirty (30) students who fell under the frustration level in reading due to comprehension difficulties. The identified learners showed a struggle with automatic word recognition, which directly impacted their reading fluency and comprehension skills. Under DepEd Order No. 70, s. 2012 (Every Child a Reader Program – ECARP), which oversees reading programs in public schools to improve the literacy levels of struggling readers.

Traditional remediation techniques often fail to sustain student interest, leading to disengagement and limited improvement. In response to this issue, the Department of Education (DepEd) has taken steps to address the concern by focusing on enhancing literacy through curriculum adjustments, targeted interventions, and teacher training. It also supports the integration of innovative, learner-centered strategies such as gamification to improve literacy outcomes, particularly for students enrolled in reading programs.

DepEd Order No. 42, s. 2017 (Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers (PPST) emphasizes differentiated instruction, encouraging teachers to adopt varied approaches tailored to learners' diverse needs. Gamification, which applies game-design elements to education, has been shown to significantly increase student engagement, motivation, and reading proficiency. Educators have begun adopting gamification—the use of game-like elements, such as points, badges, rewards, and competitive tasks—as a strategy to make learning more enjoyable and motivating. Under the DepEd Order No. 12, s. 2020, also known as the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP). This order emphasized the need for technological upgrades and innovations in learning resources and platforms, which can include gamified learning.

Numerous studies have demonstrated the potential of gamification to boost engagement and performance, particularly in reading and language education. To illustrate this, Matyakhan et al. (2024) found that Thai students who participated in gamified reading lessons showed higher comprehension scores and motivation compared to those in conventional classes. However, despite its growing popularity, the application of gamification in remedial reading settings—specifically for struggling readers—remains underexplored, especially from the perspective of teachers implementing it.

This led the researchers to delve deeper into this concern among the teachers who have been using gamification as part of their remedial classes.

Research Questions

This study aimed to fill that gap by exploring the lived experiences of junior high school English teachers who use gamification in their reading remediation sessions. Specifically, it aimed to understand the experiences and challenges they encountered, how they described the effectiveness of these strategies, and what insights they gained from their implementation. The researchers focused on the following

questions:

1. What are the experiences teachers encountered in using gamification for reading remediation of struggling readers?
2. What challenges do teachers face in utilizing gamified reading remediation?
3. How do teachers describe their experiences in utilizing gamified reading activities?

Literature Review

The literature review examined the global and local relevance of gamification in teaching reading, with a particular focus on its application for struggling readers. International studies highlight that gamification enhances student engagement, motivation, and literacy development by incorporating elements such as rewards, challenges, and interactive tasks into reading instruction. These strategies have been found effective in transforming traditional literacy practices into more dynamic, student-centered learning experiences. In the Philippine context, growing efforts to integrate gamified learning align with the Department of Education's advocacy for inclusive and engaging pedagogies, especially in addressing reading difficulties. However, the literature also reveals a gap in understanding how teachers implement and experience gamified instruction in real classroom settings, underscoring the need to explore their lived experiences for deeper insights into its practical impact.

Gamification in education has emerged as a dynamic strategy to improve student motivation, engagement, and academic performance. It involves incorporating game elements such as points, badges, and leaderboards into classroom instruction. Research cited in this study confirms its relevance across various learning environments. Manzano-León et al. (2021) emphasize the positive impact of gamification on student participation and knowledge retention, while Oliveira et al. (2023) highlight the need to focus gamification on educational outcomes rather than mere gaming preferences. Furthermore, according to Cavus et al. (2023), there are differences in the global adaptation of gamification. Developed countries integrate gamification effectively, while developing countries encounter obstacles in its implementation.

The rapid digitalization accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed educators to adopt strategies that better engage the digitally native students. Aldalur and Perez (2023) explored the integration of gamification and discovery learning through WebQuests in a Software Engineering Course at Mondragon to address the challenge of fostering engaging instruction in response to rising student disengagement. The use of gamification made the theoretical sessions more interactive and enjoyable, resulting in increased participation and improved students' understanding. Abdeen and Albiladi (2021) investigated the use of games to develop grammar, vocabulary, and language skills among English learners, highlighting the potential of gamification. They emphasized the need for further research on how gamification affects the learning environment and how teachers influence its implementation.

In literacy instruction, gamification is seen as a valuable approach to support struggling readers. Durano and Candilas (2023) compared game-based learning (GBL) and teacher-directed instruction (TDI) and found that GBL was more effective in enhancing reading comprehension and engagement. Similarly, Cardeno (2024) highlighted that play-based strategies help address emotional and behavioral difficulties of readers, making literacy tasks less intimidating. Gomez (2024) supported these findings by documenting interventions for learners with limited vocabulary and reading comprehension, noting that gamified learning helped overcome such challenges. Despite its potential, the integration of gamification in remedial reading settings still faces obstacles. Zainuddin et al. (2020) identified several limitations, including a lack of teacher training, insufficient resources, and inconsistent student engagement.

Araújo and Carvalho (2022) further emphasized that internet access, time constraints, and student tech issues hinder effective implementation. These barriers are especially pronounced in public school contexts where digital limitations are common.

The reviewed literature revealed a significant research gap. While many studies focused on student performance, few explored the lived experiences of teachers applying gamification, particularly in remedial reading instruction. This current study addressed that gap by employing a transcendental phenomenological approach to capture the personal experiences, strategies, and insights of teachers who use gamified methods for struggling readers. Understanding their perspectives can contribute to more effective literacy interventions and teacher training programs.

Methodology

Research Design

This research employed a transcendental phenomenological approach based on the principles of Edmund Husserl (1938) and Clark Moustakas (1994). The goal was to explore and describe the lived experiences of teachers who utilized gamification in reading remediation for struggling readers. By employing transcendental phenomenology, the researchers were able to bracket their own assumptions through the process of epoche, enabling them to focus solely on the participants' experiences as they lived and described them.

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of five (5) junior high school English teachers, selected through purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria required that participants (1) had experience teaching reading remediation, (2) had utilized gamification strategies in

their instruction, and (3) worked with struggling readers. Participants were contacted and invited to participate voluntarily.

Procedure

For data collection, the researchers used three primary methods: structured interviews, document analysis, and reflective journals. Interview questions were prepared based on the study objectives and validated by experts. Each interview was conducted privately and recorded with consent. The researchers also analyzed relevant documents, such as lesson plans and student outputs, and asked the teachers to write a reflective journal about their experiences with gamified reading activities. Notes and photographs were taken to support the data. The study strictly followed ethical research protocols. Approval was secured from the Division of Quezon City and the school principal. Informed consent was obtained from all participants after explaining the nature, purpose, and confidentiality of the study. The identities of the participants were protected by using pseudonyms, and all data collected was kept secure and confidential.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Moustakas' phenomenological method (1994). After epoche, the researchers engaged in horizontalization, where significant statements were extracted from the transcripts. These were organized into meaning units and clustered into themes. From these, the researchers developed textural (what was experienced) and structural (how it was experienced) descriptions. These descriptions were then synthesized into a composite essence that encapsulated the core of the teachers' shared experiences with gamified reading remediation. Thorough document analysis and validation of the following data through triangulation allowed the researchers to reduce bias, enhance accuracy, and improve the trustworthiness of the findings.

Results and Discussion

Key themes emerged from the data collected through structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis. The lived experiences of five (5) English teachers revealed common insights about the benefits, challenges, and reflective practices related to using gamification in reading remediation for struggling readers. Five (5) primary themes were identified:

Theme 1: Gamification Enhances Student Engagement and Motivation

All participants shared that gamification significantly increased learner participation, especially among struggling readers. The incorporation of game elements such as points, leaderboards, and rewards fostered enthusiasm and reduced resistance toward reading tasks. Teachers observed that students were more attentive and enthusiastic about participating in activities when lessons were gamified.

"When students are engaged through gamification... they are actively involved, motivated, and enjoying the process." – Participant 1

This engagement translated to higher attendance and a more positive attitude toward remedial classes, which are often viewed as tedious or discouraging.

Theme 2: Reading Progress is Achieved Through Play

Teachers described how gamified reading activities led to observable improvements in students' vocabulary, comprehension, and oral reading fluency. Many struggling readers showed better focus when tasks were presented as games, whether digital or physical.

"The growth in vocabulary of the students is evident. They are exposed to new words repeatedly in games, and they remember those words because they enjoyed learning them." – Participant 2

Games like digital quizzes, flashcard races, and "word of the day" challenges helped reinforce learning while maintaining a fun and non-threatening environment.

Theme 3: Gamification is Not a One-Size-Fits-All Approach

Despite its benefits, teachers highlighted the importance of flexibility and creativity in gamifying instruction. There is no universal template that fits all students, and activities must be customized based on learners' needs and interests.

"I tried to combine traditional and digital games. Not all students are tech-savvy or have phones, so I had to adjust my strategies." – Participant 3

Teachers developed their own materials and modified existing games to align with reading objectives, showcasing a high level of instructional adaptability.

Theme 4: Challenges in Implementation Include Resources and Distraction

Participants reported facing significant challenges, especially with access to digital tools and reliable internet. In some cases, students lacked smartphones or became distracted during online activities. Teachers also expressed difficulty in finding age-appropriate games that matched their instructional goals.

"There is the danger of students just focusing on the games and wandering off from the real task." – Participant 5

These limitations often required extra planning time, personal expense, and adjustments in instructional delivery to maintain student

focus and learning integrity.

Theme 5: Teacher Reflection Strengthens Instructional Practice

Teachers emphasized the importance of reflection in successfully implementing gamification. Through evaluating students' reactions and learning progress, they refined their game-based approaches over time. Monitoring was conducted through visual aids, including progress charts, daily participation logs, and performance tracking tools.

"Through reflection, I realized what works and what doesn't. I listen to student feedback and change my strategies when needed." – Participant 4

Gamification, when paired with reflective teaching, was seen as a powerful tool to motivate students while promoting long-term growth in reading skills.

These five themes collectively demonstrate that gamification, when thoughtfully and creatively, has a transformative impact on struggling readers. However, its success depends on the teacher's ability to adapt, monitor progress, and reflect continuously on instructional outcomes.

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of junior high school English teachers who used gamification to support struggling readers. Participants noted that gamification helped maintain students' attention and made reading activities more interactive and meaningful. This suggests that gamified approaches can create a more enjoyable learning environment, which in turn motivates students and reduces their anxiety around reading.

In the specific context of Jose P. Laurel Sr. High School, where existing programs such as Project LEAP and ICCARE were already in place, gamification served as a complementary strategy to reinvigorate student interest. Teachers observed that students who were usually passive in traditional remediation became much more engaged when lessons were framed as games. This highlights gamification's potential not only to encourage positive classroom behavior but also to aid in developing essential reading skills, such as comprehension and vocabulary.

The experiences shared by the five teachers reveal that gamification is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Each teacher adapted and personalized their techniques based on the resources they had available and the needs of their learners. For example, some integrated digital platforms, such as Kahoot!, while others relied on low-tech games, including flashcard races or sticker-based reward systems. This adaptability underscores the important role of teacher agency—the ability to make deliberate, context-sensitive decisions—and creativity in successfully implementing gamified instruction in resource-limited settings.

Despite its benefits, the study also highlighted several challenges. Teachers encountered limitations, including the scarcity of digital devices, poor internet connectivity, and the risk that games could distract students from meeting the learning objectives. These issues reflect the realities faced by many public schools with limited resources. However, the teachers' resilience came through as they found ways to overcome these obstacles, continuously reflecting on and adjusting their methods to strike a balance between engagement and instructional focus.

Reflective practice emerged as another key factor in the effective use of gamification. Teachers regularly assessed the impact of their approaches using student feedback, classroom observations, and assessment outcomes, which allowed them to refine their strategies and ensure the learning goals remained central. They emphasized the need to align gamification with clear educational objectives to maintain instructional purpose.

Overall, this study contributes to the ongoing dialogue about inclusive and innovative teaching by highlighting the experiences of public school teachers working under challenging conditions. When gamification is combined with planning, teacher agency, and reflective practice, it can lead to meaningful improvements in both student engagement and literacy development.

Conclusions

This study explored the lived experiences of junior high school English teachers who used gamification as a strategy in reading remediation for struggling readers. The findings revealed that gamification has a positive impact on learner engagement, motivation, and reading progress. Teachers observed notable behavioral improvements in their students, including increased participation, better focus, and stronger vocabulary retention. By presenting learning as play, gamification created an atmosphere of fun that encouraged struggling readers to persist with tasks they once found challenging.

Despite these positive outcomes, the study also highlighted contextual challenges, including limited access to digital resources, internet connectivity issues, and the potential for distraction if gamification is not managed correctly. The teachers emphasized that there is no universal template for gamified instruction; instead, strategies must be adapted to suit the learners' needs, available resources, and specific instructional goals. Moreover, the study emphasized the role of teacher reflection, creativity, and persistence in successfully implementing gamification.

These insights have practical implications for classroom practice, school programs, and educational policy. Gamification holds

significant promise as a supplementary instructional strategy in reading remediation, especially in public school settings with limited resources.

For Practitioners: Design gamified activities that are aligned with specific reading objectives, such as comprehension, fluency, or vocabulary development; blend both digital and traditional forms of gamification to accommodate students with limited access to technology; continuously reflect on and adjust game-based strategies based on student responses, engagement levels, and learning outcomes; utilize progress monitoring tools (e.g., sticker charts, participation records) to assess individual and group performance.

For Policymakers: Provide training and capacity-building programs for teachers on how to implement gamification effectively, particularly in reading instruction; allocate funding for instructional materials, including low-tech and no-tech gamification tools, to support schools with limited resources; integrate gamification into national or division-level reading remediation frameworks such as the ECARP and Bawat Bata Bumabasa (3Bs) initiatives.

For Future Researchers: Conduct similar phenomenological studies involving student perspectives to provide a fuller understanding of gamification's effects. Explore the long-term impact of gamification on reading fluency and academic performance. Investigate the use of gamification across different grade levels and subject areas to determine transferability and broader applicability.

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