



# Engaging EFL Learners Through Non-Digital Gamification: Enhancing Motivation, Commitment, and Flow in Academic Writing

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## Abstract

This study explores how non-digital gamification influences the engagement, motivation, and sense of agency among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in academic writing. Conducted within a low-resource educational setting in Chile, this research aims to understand learners' experiences and perceptions, delving into how gamified activities shape their interactions with the writing process in a non-digital, resource-constrained environment. Despite the recognized challenges of academic writing in EFL settings, limited access to digital resources often restricts the use of traditional gamified tools. This study adopts a qualitative case study approach, examining a cohort of pre-service teachers in a university English Language Teaching program who participated in gamified writing lessons incorporating analogue game mechanics, such as daily missions, symbolic rewards, and progress tracking. The analysis reveals that non-digital gamification fosters motivation by balancing intrinsic and extrinsic motivators, encourages sustained engagement through mechanics that promote a "flow" state, and enhances student agency by allowing autonomous decision-making within the learning process. Furthermore, the active role of the teacher in managing and tailoring game elements to student needs emerged as crucial to the approach's success. This research contributes to the understanding of gamification's potential beyond digital applications, demonstrating how resource-conscious, non-digital methods can make academic writing more accessible and empowering for EFL learners. The findings suggest practical implications for implementing gamified strategies in similar low-resource educational environments and provide a foundation for future studies on sustainable gamification practices in language education.

## Keywords

gamification; academic writing; student engagement; student agency; EFL

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# Fomentar a participação de estudantes de EFL por meio da gamificação não digital: Melhoria da motivação, do engajamento e do flow na escrita acadêmica

## Resumo

Este estudo explora como a gamificação não digital influencia o engajamento, a motivação e o senso de agência entre aprendizes de Inglês como Língua Estrangeira (EFL) na escrita acadêmica. Realizada em um contexto educacional com poucos recursos no Chile, esta pesquisa busca compreender as experiências e percepções dos estudantes, investigando como atividades gamificadas moldam suas interações com o processo de escrita em um ambiente não digital e com recursos limitados. Apesar dos desafios reconhecidos da escrita acadêmica em contextos de EFL, o acesso restrito a recursos digitais frequentemente limita o uso de ferramentas tradicionais de gamificação. Este estudo adota uma abordagem qualitativa de estudo de caso, examinando um grupo de professores em formação inicial em um curso universitário de Licenciatura em Ensino de Língua Inglesa que participou de aulas de escrita gamificadas incorporando mecânicas de jogos analógicas, como missões diárias, recompensas simbólicas e acompanhamento de progresso. A análise revela que a gamificação não digital promove a motivação ao equilibrar motivadores intrínsecos e extrínsecos, incentiva o engajamento sustentado por meio de mecânicas que favorecem um estado de "flow" e fortalece a agência estudantil ao permitir a tomada de decisões autônomas dentro do processo de aprendizagem. Além disso, o papel ativo do professor na gestão e adaptação dos elementos do jogo às necessidades dos estudantes mostrou-se crucial para o sucesso da abordagem. Esta pesquisa contribui para a compreensão do potencial da gamificação para além das aplicações digitais, demonstrando como métodos não digitais, sensíveis às limitações de recursos, podem tornar a escrita acadêmica mais acessível e empoderadora para aprendizes de EFL. Os resultados sugerem implicações práticas para a implementação de estratégias gamificadas em contextos educacionais semelhantes com poucos recursos e fornecem uma base para estudos futuros sobre práticas sustentáveis de gamificação no ensino de línguas.

## Palavras-chave

gamificação; escrita acadêmica; engajamento estudantil; agência estudantil; EFL

# Fomentar la participación de estudiantes de EFL a través de la gamificación no digital: mejora de la motivación, el compromiso y el *flow* en la escritura académica

## Resumen

Este estudio explora cómo la gamificación no digital influye en el compromiso, la motivación y el sentido de agencia entre estudiantes de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera (EFL) en la escritura académica. Realizada en un contexto educativo con recursos limitados en Chile, esta investigación busca comprender las experiencias y percepciones de los estudiantes, profundizando en cómo las actividades gamificadas configuran sus interacciones con el proceso de escritura en un entorno no digital y con restricciones de recursos. A pesar de los desafíos reconocidos de la escritura académica en contextos de EFL, el acceso limitado a recursos digitales suele restringir el uso de herramientas tradicionales de gamificación. Este estudio adopta un enfoque cualitativo de estudio de caso, examinando una cohorte de docentes en formación inicial en un programa universitario de Pedagogía en Inglés que participaron en clases de escritura gamificadas que incorporaban mecánicas de juego analógicas, tales como misiones diarias, recompensas simbólicas y seguimiento del progreso. El análisis revela que la gamificación no digital fomenta la motivación al equilibrar motivadores intrínsecos y extrínsecos, promueve un compromiso sostenido mediante mecánicas que favorecen un estado de "flow" y fortalece la agencia estudiantil al permitir la toma de decisiones autónomas dentro del proceso de aprendizaje. Además, el rol activo del docente en la gestión y adaptación de los elementos del juego a las

necesidades de los estudiantes resultó crucial para el éxito del enfoque. Esta investigación contribuye a la comprensión del potencial de la gamificación más allá de las aplicaciones digitales, demostrando cómo métodos no digitales, conscientes de las limitaciones de recursos, pueden hacer que la escritura académica sea más accesible y empoderadora para los estudiantes de EFL. Los hallazgos sugieren implicancias prácticas para la implementación de estrategias gamificadas en contextos educativos similares con recursos limitados y proporcionan una base para futuros estudios sobre prácticas sostenibles de gamificación en la educación lingüística.

### Palabras clave

gamificación; escritura académica; compromiso estudiantil; agencia estudiantil; EFL

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## Introduction

In recent years, academic writing has become a critical component of education, particularly for English Language Teaching (ELT) professionals who want to advance their career. Teachers pursuing advanced studies are often required to engage in extensive research, crafting dissertations, essays, and journal articles that bridge theoretical understanding with practical application (Kolb, 2013; Rawson et al., 2005; Tesh et al., 2014). Academic writing, within English for Academic Purposes (EAP), enables language educators to convey ideas effectively, contributing both to their own professional development and to the advancement of knowledge within their field. Flowerdew and Peacock (2001) define EAP as “the teaching of English with the specific aim of helping learners to study, conduct research, or teach in that language” (p. 8), underscoring the role of academic writing as an essential skill for educators aiming to communicate and perform at a high level.

Despite its significance, academic writing remains challenging, especially for EFL students, who often encounter difficulties navigating complex structures, conventions, and formal language requirements (Richards & Renandya, 2002). The theoretical and instructional foundations for academic writing vary widely across institutions, frequently relying more on educators’ intuitive knowledge than on structured pedagogical frameworks (Cowley-Haselden & Monbec, 2019; Hyland, 2006; Walková, 2024). This variability can lead to disengagement among students, particularly those in resource-limited settings such as Chile, where English proficiency is encouraged at the policy level, but practical instructional support remains inconsistent (Ministerio de Educación de Chile, 2021). Notably, Chilean university students have reported struggling with core

academic writing tasks, such as paragraph construction and revision, due in part to the limited emphasis placed on theoretical knowledge in writing instruction (Vine-Jara, 2020).

To address these challenges, gamification has emerged as a promising approach to make learning experiences more engaging and effective. Gamification, or the application of game elements in non-game contexts, has shown success in enhancing motivation and engagement across various educational settings (Deterding et al., 2011; Hamari et al., 2014; Kapp, 2012; Sailer & Homner, 2020). While most gamification research emphasizes digital platforms such as Kahoot, Duolingo, and Quizlet (Zainuddin et al., 2020), there is a notable gap in the exploration of non-digital gamification methods, especially within academic writing (Guo et al., 2024; El Tantawi et al., 2018). Non-digital gamification may be particularly valuable in Chile, where limited access to digital tools makes traditional, resource-intensive gamified platforms impractical in many settings (Ministerio de Educación de Chile, 2021).

Through an in-depth exploration of how non-digital gamification influences students' motivation, engagement, and sense of agency, this research enriches our understanding of gamification's educational potential. By delving into the lived experiences of learners in resource-limited EFL classrooms, it offers nuanced insights into how gamified strategies can be practically adapted to foster a more empowering and participatory learning environment.

Therefore, this study aims to explore how non-digital gamification influences motivation, engagement, and student agency in EFL academic writing within a low-resource higher education context.

## Research Questions

To enhance clarity and guide the study, the following research questions (RQ) are presented:

RQ1. How do students perceive the use of non-digital gamification in EFL writing lessons in terms of enhancing motivation, commitment, and flow?

RQ2. Which non-digital gamification strategies are most effective in improving academic writing skills while fostering motivation, commitment, and flow among EFL students?

RQ3. How does non-digital gamification influence student agency, particularly regarding decision-making, self-directed learning, and the experience of motivation, commitment, and flow?

These questions will be operationalized through qualitative data collected via interviews, with responses mapped to thematic findings.

## Theoretical Framework

### Gamification in Education

Gamification is the integration of game-like elements, such as points, levels, challenges, and rewards, into non-game environments to enhance motivation, engagement, and overall learning outcomes (Deterding et al., 2011; Kapp, 2012). In educational settings, gamification seeks to make learning more engaging by transforming conventional activities into interactive experiences, thus fostering a dynamic and student-centered learning environment (Hamari et al., 2014; Sailer & Homner, 2020). While digital gamification tools, such as Kahoot and Quizlet, have garnered substantial attention, non-digital approaches remain underexplored, particularly in resource-limited settings. This study conceptualizes non-digital gamification as the application of game mechanics to traditional classroom activities, where students engage without reliance on digital technology (Miller, 2021; Qiao et al., 2023).

### Motivation and Gamification

Motivation plays a crucial role in learning and is often categorized as intrinsic or extrinsic according to Self-Determination Theory by Ryan and Deci (2000). Intrinsic motivation refers to a learner's internal desire to engage in a task for personal satisfaction, while extrinsic motivation arises from external rewards or recognition. Gamification can engage both by incorporating mechanics such as quests, challenges, and external validation through badges or rewards (Chou, 2019; Marczewski, 2018). Additionally, Achievement Goal Theory (AGT) suggests that individuals are motivated by their desire to achieve mastery and performance goals (Kim et al., 2018), while Expectancy-Value Theories emphasize that motivation is influenced by one's expectations of success and the perceived value of a task (Dörnyei, 2011). Bell (2018) highlights gamification's potential to create personalized learning experiences tailored to diverse motivational profiles. However, for sustained impact, gamification must extend beyond surface engagement, ensuring that its design integrates intrinsic drivers such as autonomy and skill mastery with extrinsic incentives in ways that align with learners' expectations and goal orientations (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011).

### Gamification, Engagement, and Flow

Closely linked to motivation, engagement refers to the depth and quality of student participation in learning activities. Active engagement is crucial for academic writing, where students must immerse themselves in tasks that require

focus, creativity, and higher-order thinking skills. Gamification fosters engagement by creating interactive environments that encourage students to participate, solve problems, and collaborate (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). In particular, gamification can induce a “flow” state, where learners are fully absorbed in an activity with a sense of focus and enjoyment, balancing the challenge level with their skill set (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997).

Flow theory posits that learning is optimized when tasks are neither too easy nor overly difficult, creating a sweet spot of engagement. By offering continuous feedback, adjusting task difficulty, and setting clear goals, gamification can promote this optimal learning state (Chou, 2019; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Studies in EFL contexts indicate that gamification can make traditional passive tasks, like writing, more engaging through activities that challenge students and foster creativity (Lee & Hammer, 2011). For instance, framing writing exercises as quests or collaborative challenges can transform the learning process into an engaging, immersive experience that maintains students’ attention and encourages perseverance.

## Student Agency and Gamification

Student agency, defined as students’ capacity to make meaningful choices and take actions that influence their learning, is central to effective gamified learning environments (CPEIP, 2021). In gamification, agency is often realized through mechanics that give students autonomy, such as self-paced challenges, choice-driven tasks, and goal-setting opportunities. Bandura (2006) argues that agency develops not only through internal motivation but also through external influences, such as the learning environment and social interactions. In gamified classrooms, fostering student agency becomes essential as it allows learners to take control over their learning paths. Such agency is not merely about making decisions; it involves active engagement and investment in the learning process, which can enhance motivation and learning satisfaction (Landers et al., 2020; Lee & Hammer, 2011).

In the context of EFL academic writing, gamification provides a pathway for promoting agency by allowing students to make decisions that affect their writing process and learning goals. Research suggests that gamified tasks which incorporate self-regulation and reflection encourage students to take ownership of their learning, fostering intrinsic motivation and long-term engagement (Bui et al. 2023). For instance, by allowing students to set writing goals or select specific tasks, educators can create a learning environment that respects individual agency, making academic writing a more empowering and student-centered experience.

## Non-Digital Gamification in Low-Resource Settings

In low-resource educational contexts, non-digital gamification offers a flexible and sustainable alternative to technology-dependent approaches (Petri et al., 2018). This study conceptualizes non-digital gamification as the integration of game mechanics, such as turn-taking, progress tracking, and symbolic rewards, into traditional classroom activities (Miller, 2021). In Chile, where access to digital tools is often limited, such approaches are especially relevant. By designing low-cost, analogue gamification strategies, educators can provide engaging learning experiences without relying on technology (Qiao et al., 2023).

Non-digital gamification aligns with broader educational goals, including the promotion of critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration skills (Qian & Clark, 2016; Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2017). For example, a writing lesson structured as a quest could require students to progress through tasks collaboratively, earning symbolic rewards and feedback at each stage. Such activities not only enhance engagement but also foster essential skills that extend beyond the classroom, providing a practical solution for resource-constrained educational settings.

## Methodology

### Research Design

This study employs a qualitative case study approach, which enables an in-depth exploration of complex phenomena in real-world settings (Crowe et al., 2011; Yin, 2018). Given the complexities of gamification in academic writing, this design is well-suited to capture the traces of student engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes within an English Language Teaching (ELT) program. The case study approach allows for a detailed examination of student experiences in a naturalistic classroom environment, providing rich qualitative insights into how non-digital gamification strategies influence academic writing skills among EFL learners in Chile. This approach provides the flexibility to capture and analyze the diverse ways in which different game mechanics influence learners' experiences. By documenting individual responses to the gamified curriculum, the study can offer rich, nuanced insights into the varying impacts of gamification on engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes.

## Participants and Setting

Participants were third-year pre-service teachers enrolled in an ELT program at a private university in Santiago, Chile. This university predominantly serves students from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, many of whom are the first in their families to attend university. To support students in their academic pursuits, the institution provides financial assistance, including a government-funded “free university tuition” program, enabling access to higher education for low-income students.

All participants were part of the Academic Writing 3 course, where gamified lessons were implemented as part of their curriculum. This course consisted of six hours of in-class instruction and six hours of autonomous work per week. The timing of the research was significant, as it followed a transition to fully in-person instruction after a period of hybrid and online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The students’ English proficiency levels ranged from B1 to C1; however, most had entered the university with a basic proficiency level below A1.

A convenience sampling method was used to select four participants—two male and two female pre-service teachers—who volunteered for the study. The participants varied in their familiarity with gamified approaches and included diverse profiles: one participant had prior experience with video games, while others had limited exposure to gamification. In order to diminish this weakness, the students were selected due to the diversity and experience.

## Gamified Course Design

The Academic Writing 3 course was restructured to incorporate non-digital gamification elements, designed to align with Marczewski’s (2018) User Types: Player, Achiever, and Free Spirit. Informal surveys and conversations with students helped the instructor identify these motivational profiles, enabling the integration of specific game mechanics that resonated with students’ preferences.

Two primary gamification mechanics were embedded in each lesson: Daily Missions and Random Rewards. **Daily Missions:** To engage students with an “Achiever” profile, each lesson included specific tasks, termed Daily Missions, such as “Speak only in English during the lesson” or “Construct three complex sentences.” These tasks aimed to enhance writing skills through incremental challenges that encouraged self-discipline and achievement. At the end of each lesson, the teacher reviewed the completion of these missions, reinforcing a sense of accomplishment and mastery.

**Random Rewards:** Designed for students with “Player” and “Free Spirit” motivations, Random Rewards introduced an element of surprise to maintain curiosity and engagement. Upon completion of Daily Missions, students could receive symbolic rewards, such as badges, thematic characters, and progress markers, including an “egg” that hatched upon reaching specific milestones. These elements were designed to create anticipation, with the egg’s contents representing both a reward and a measure of students’ progress.

All materials for these gamified elements were created using accessible, free resources like Microsoft PowerPoint and Google Search, highlighting the feasibility of implementing gamified lessons without costly platforms. This approach underscored the study’s commitment to low-resource, sustainable gamification practices that could be replicated in similar educational contexts.

## Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews (Ary et al., 2018), chosen for their ability to elicit in-depth responses while allowing participants the flexibility to expand on their experiences. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and consisted of six open-ended questions designed to explore participants’ perceptions of the gamified lessons, their reflections on how gamification influenced their writing skills, and their observations of agency and engagement throughout the course. An interview protocol was developed prior to data collection, including sample questions and prompts. Data saturation was reached when no new themes emerged during the final interviews, ensuring that the dataset was comprehensive. The interviews were conducted in private university classrooms, with Participants 1 and 2 interviewed individually, and Participants 3 and 4 interviewed together to accommodate their preferences. Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and stored securely, ensuring data confidentiality and accessibility only to the research team.

## Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), was used to analyze the interview data. Coding was performed manually, with codes derived both from the literature and from recurring themes in the participants’ experiences. Specifically, the analysis followed these steps: (a) familiarization with the data through repeated readings of the transcripts; (b) generation of initial codes; (c) identification of themes by clustering related codes; (d) review and refinement of the themes to ensure they accurately reflected the data; and (e) final definition and naming of themes leading to the production of the final report. In addition, inter-coder reliability was enhanced by having a second researcher

independently code a subset of transcripts, and any discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus, thereby minimizing potential bias.

## Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were informed of the study's purpose and their rights as participants, including confidentiality and voluntary withdrawal. Pseudonyms were assigned to ensure anonymity, and interview recordings were stored securely with restricted access.

## Findings

A qualitative thematic analysis of the data highlighted four main themes on how non-digital gamification influenced EFL students' academic writing: Acquisition, Mechanics, Motivation & Concentration, and Teacher's Role. These themes illuminate the multifaceted impact of gamification on students' engagement and motivation, as well as the development of their writing skills, directly addressing the research questions regarding student perceptions (RQ1), effective gamification strategies (RQ2), and student agency (RQ3). By exploring how students relate to these themes, the study reveals rich insights into their lived experiences and perceptions of the gamified curriculum. This qualitative perspective highlights the complexity of gamification's influence, emphasizing not just improvements in skills but also the transformative nature of student engagement and teacher support in fostering an effective learning environment (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Lee & Hammer, 2011). Such insights are vital for understanding the nuanced dynamics of gamified learning and its potential to reshape educational practices. To facilitate a clearer understanding of how the identified themes relate to the research questions, Table 1 summarizes the relationship between the research questions and the emergent themes identified in the analysis.

**Table 1.**

*Relationship between Research Questions and Emergent Themes*

Research questions	Associated themes
RQ1 How do students perceive the use of non-digital gamification in EFL writing lessons in terms of enhancing motivation, commitment, and flow?	Motivation & Concentration; Mechanics

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RQ2 Which non-digital gamification strategies are most effective in improving academic writing skills while fostering motivation, commitment, and flow?	Mechanics; Acquisition
RQ3 How does non-digital gamification influence student agency, particularly regarding decision-making, self-directed learning, and the experience of motivation, commitment, and flow?	Teacher's Role; Acquisition; Mechanics; Motivation & Concentration

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*Note. Own elaboration.*

## Theme 1: Acquisition

The theme of Acquisition refers to participants' internalization of writing skills and language structures through the gamified lessons, responding primarily to RQ 2 and 3. All four participants noted that the repetitive and structured nature of the Daily Missions helped them develop writing skills without consciously focusing on formal rules. Participant 3 emphasized the motivational role of gamification in this process: "Gamification is an amazing way to motivate us, because if you're just explaining grammatical rules, it's boring, and students who are bored don't learn effectively." Participant 1 echoed this sentiment, noting that gamified lessons fostered deeper engagement and internalization of content: "I paid more attention, and when I had evaluations, I remembered everything from the lessons, just because of the objectives (Daily Missions) the teacher had used."

The gamified activities also created a natural learning environment where students practiced language structures organically. Participant 4 stated, "We were practicing without necessarily thinking about sentence structures explicitly." Additionally, the anticipation of symbolic rewards, such as the progress-tracking "egg," added an element of excitement that motivated students to stay engaged. Participant 2 noted that the expectation surrounding the egg mechanic "made me want to keep going to see what would happen next," illustrating how the gamified structure fostered sustained engagement.

## Theme 2: Mechanics

The effectiveness of specific Mechanics within the gamified course directly addresses RQ 1, 2 and 3 as their inclusion is central to designing gamified experiences. Central game mechanics, such as progress bars, rewards, and Daily Missions, were highlighted for their role in increasing engagement and providing a sense of achievement. Participant 1 described the motivating influence of the progress bar: "Seeing my progress helped me stay focused, and I liked having a visual reminder of what I had achieved." Participant 3 also valued the visual

elements, finding them effective for maintaining motivation and tracking improvements in writing skills. Participants frequently referred to the “egg” mechanic as a standout feature, which contributed both to motivation and engagement. Designed to “hatch” upon completion of milestones, the egg mechanic offered symbolic rewards that resonated with students’ personal interests. Participant 2 recounted how the egg revealed a personalized reward—a character that he found particularly meaningful—describing it as “a fun surprise that kept me interested.” The unexpected nature of these rewards added a layer of novelty to each lesson, reinforcing students’ commitment to completing Daily Missions. These Missions served as a fundamental mechanic, guiding students toward specific writing objectives. Participant 2 shared that the missions “helped me concentrate and focus on specific tasks,” suggesting that these structured activities aligned with both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. The dynamic between missions and rewards created an environment where students were motivated not only by the promise of rewards but also by the satisfaction of accomplishing tasks, indicating a successful balance between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation.

### Theme 3: Motivation & Concentration

Motivation & Concentration explicitly addresses RQ1 and RQ3 by capturing student perceptions of increased motivation, sustained commitment, and flow during writing tasks. Participants described feeling more motivated to engage actively in lessons and to approach writing tasks with greater enthusiasm. Participant 1 remarked that gamification “activated a switch in my brain,” helping him remain focused on the writing tasks. Similarly, Participant 2 noted that the lessons encouraged him to develop his writing ideas autonomously, a significant shift from traditional instruction that directly relates to RQ3. The importance of teacher engagement was also frequently mentioned within this theme. Participant 2 described the teacher’s energy and enthusiasm as directly influencing student motivation: “It’s important that the teacher is eager to teach because students feed off that energy.” The integration of popular cultural references and game mechanics based on student interests further strengthened motivation, making the lessons relatable and enjoyable.

For Participant 3, the gamified structure brought a sense of accomplishment, noting that “when you have missions to achieve, it feels like you did something good” Participant 2 highlighted the role of symbolic rewards in maintaining focus, contrasting them with traditional lessons, which often failed to capture his attention. Overall, participants viewed gamification as an innovative and engaging approach that should be more widely adopted, expressing a desire to incorporate similar methods in their own future teaching practices.

## Theme 4: Teacher's Role

The Teacher's Role intersects with all three research questions by emphasizing how teacher engagement, attitude, and adaptability influence students' motivation, commitment, and agency. Participants described the teacher as an active and central figure in the gamified learning experience, particularly in setting clear expectations, fostering engagement, and maintaining motivation. Participant 1 credited the teacher with helping him stay focused by suggesting progress bars as a motivational tool during writing tasks. Participant 1 also recalled his own high school experience: "It's the cool and friendly teacher stereotype—the one who's close to students and not authoritarian. That's what works best." Participants emphasized that an effective gamified approach requires teachers to be approachable and attentive to students' needs. Participant 2 noted that the teacher's energy and approachable attitude created a positive learning atmosphere, stating, "You can see that he really wants to teach, and that motivates us." The teacher's adaptability in aligning lessons with students' interests was seen as crucial for effective gamification.

These four themes collectively respond to the research questions by offering a comprehensive understanding of how non-digital gamification supports students' learning processes. The data reveals that motivation is strengthened through the integration of carefully designed and personalized game mechanics, such as missions and symbolic rewards, which sustain engagement and foster flow (RQ1). Skill acquisition is facilitated by the implicit and repetitive nature of gamified tasks, giving learners the perception that they have internalized language forms while remaining focused on meaningful goals (RQ2). Furthermore, student agency is reinforced not only through game elements that promote autonomy and decision-making, but also by the teacher's adaptability and relational approach (RQ3). Altogether, these findings highlight how purposeful game mechanics, teacher mediation, and an engaging classroom environment combine to transform the writing experience for EFL students.

## Discussion

The results of this study highlight the transformative potential of non-digital gamification in EFL academic writing instruction, particularly in a low-resource setting such as the described university in Chile. By incorporating game elements such as daily missions, symbolic rewards, and progress-tracking visuals, students not only engaged more deeply with writing tasks but also developed essential skills without the monotony often associated with academic writing. Research findings illustrate a clear connection between themes and Research Questions:

Students' perceptions of enhanced motivation, commitment, and flow are directly addressed through themes of Motivation and Concentration and Mechanics (RQ1); the effectiveness of specific gamification strategies is detailed through analyses of Daily Missions, symbolic rewards, and progress-tracking visuals (RQ2); and student agency is approached through findings related to Teacher's Role, Mechanics, and Acquisition (RQ3). This discussion explores how these findings align with the theoretical framework and existing literature on gamification, motivation, engagement, and student agency, emphasizing the pedagogical implications and potential for broader applications.

Gamification and Motivation in EFL Academic Writing Gamification in education often seeks to increase both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Marczewski, 2018; Ryan & Deci, 2000), aiming to create learning environments that encourage students to actively engage in the learning process. In this study, motivation emerged as a key factor influenced by non-digital gamification mechanics, resonating with previous studies suggesting that gamification can foster both initial engagement and sustained interest in challenging subjects (Deterding et al., 2011; Hamari et al., 2014). Participants indicated that tasks like "Daily Missions" provided manageable, goal-oriented challenges that promoted a sense of accomplishment, aligning with Marczewski's user-type theory by addressing both "Achiever" and "Player" profiles (Marczewski, 2018). Such an approach was particularly beneficial in the context of academic writing, where intrinsic motivation can be difficult to foster.

The study findings are consistent with previous research emphasizing the role of extrinsic motivators—such as badges and rewards—in initially capturing students' interest, which is critical for subjects perceived as tedious or difficult (Chou, 2019 Nicholson, 2015). However, by structuring writing tasks as daily missions that required completion, the approach gradually shifted the focus from rewards to mastery of the writing skills themselves, fostering intrinsic motivation over time. This transition aligns with Bui et al., (2023) assertion that effective gamified learning environments balance extrinsic incentives with opportunities for intrinsic satisfaction through skill mastery and personal achievement.

## Engagement Through Gamification: The Role of Flow

Gamification fosters an engaging learning environment that encourages deep immersion in academic tasks, essential for the development of writing skills that require sustained focus and cognitive investment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). The game mechanics used in this study, such as symbolic rewards and progress markers, contributed to a heightened state of engagement by keeping students absorbed in the learning process. Participants noted that visual progress indicators helped them track their learning journey, providing immediate feedback that

supported a “flow” experience, where challenge and skill were in balance (Chou, 2019; Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). This finding is consistent with Lee and Hammer’s (2011) study, which demonstrated that gamified learning can promote flow states, particularly in skill-oriented tasks like writing.

Engagement also depended significantly on novelty and surprise. The use of an “egg” that revealed rewards upon reaching milestones created a sense of anticipation, mirroring the element of surprise found in video game mechanics that reward perseverance. These findings support Hamari et al.’s (2014) assertion that gamified elements sustaining attention can make even repetitive tasks, such as writing drills, feel new and engaging. By maintaining engagement through these mechanics, the gamified approach enabled students to persist through the often-repetitive process of skill acquisition in academic writing, enhancing both their interest and skill level.

## Student Agency and Non-Digital Gamification

One of the most significant contributions of gamification to academic writing instruction is the enhancement of student agency. Agency in educational contexts involves the ability of students to make choices that impact their learning experiences and outcomes (Bandura, 2006). In this study, gamification afforded students increased control over their learning through mechanics that allowed for autonomous decision-making, such as setting personal goals and progressing at their own pace. This emphasis on agency aligns with Landers et al. (2020), who argue that gamified classrooms that incorporate choice-driven tasks foster students’ intrinsic motivation by respecting their autonomy and promoting self-directed learning.

The study’s findings echo the assertion by CPEIP (2021) that agency is crucial in learning environments, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who may lack confidence in academic settings. Participants expressed a greater sense of ownership over their writing progress, a result of the gamified structure that enabled them to focus on individual tasks without the pressure of strict, high-stakes evaluation. This supports research by Bui et al. (2023), who found that student agency in gamified settings encourages intrinsic motivation and long-term engagement. By allowing students to “own” their learning journey through gamified mechanics, this approach made academic writing more accessible and less daunting, enabling students to engage in a self-regulated learning process.

## Teacher's Role in Gamified Learning Environments

While game mechanics are foundational to gamified learning, the teacher's role in facilitating these experiences cannot be overstated. The study revealed that the teacher's involvement was critical to the success of the gamified curriculum, with participants frequently attributing their engagement and motivation to the teacher's enthusiasm and support. This finding supports previous research suggesting that gamification is most effective when educators actively shape the learning experience by managing game elements and fostering a positive learning environment (Landers et al., 2020; Qiao et al., 2023).

Participants' comments indicated that the teacher's skill in adapting game mechanics to individual students' needs and motivations was central to the approach's effectiveness. This aligns with Bandura's (2006) view that agency is shaped by both internal and external factors, highlighting the teacher's role as an external influence that guides and supports student autonomy.

Moreover, the teacher's adaptability in aligning game mechanics with student interests helped to create a culturally relevant and engaging learning environment, which is particularly important in low-resource settings like Chile. By integrating popular cultural references and using simple, accessible resources, the teacher was able to establish a relatable context for gamification that maintained students' interest without relying on costly digital tools (Miller, 2021). This approach underscores the potential for teachers to play an instrumental role in adapting gamified methods to suit various educational contexts, fostering a supportive and inclusive environment that empowers students to take ownership of their learning. In line with this, Carvalho et al. (2025) argue that students value teachers who integrate technology meaningfully, demonstrate strong command of their subject by connecting theory and practice, and convey genuine enthusiasm in their teaching—qualities reflected in the teacher's implementation of Gamification strategies.

## Non-Digital Gamification as a Sustainable Approach in Low-Resource Settings

The feasibility of non-digital gamification for resource-constrained educational settings is a significant contribution of this study. Chile, like many low-resource educational contexts, faces limitations in access to digital technology, making traditional, resource-intensive gamification platforms impractical (Ministerio de Educación de Chile, 2021). By designing non-digital game mechanics using accessible materials, this study demonstrates how gamification can be implemented sustainably in classrooms without relying on technology.

These findings support Petri et al.'s (2018) view that non-digital gamification can offer engaging, accessible learning experiences that promote critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration skills. By structuring lessons as quests or challenges, teachers in low-resource settings can replicate the motivational benefits of gamification while fostering an environment that encourages collaboration and skill-building. This approach, which aligns with Qiao et al.'s (2023) definition of non-digital gamification, highlights the adaptability and scalability of analogue game mechanics for various educational contexts, offering a promising alternative for under-resourced classrooms worldwide.

## Conclusion

In sum, this study demonstrates the effectiveness of non-digital gamification in enhancing motivation, engagement, and agency among EFL learners in academic writing. By incorporating simple, cost-effective game mechanics that encourage autonomy and skill development, non-digital gamification offers a viable pedagogical approach for low-resource educational contexts.

The implementation of game mechanics such as Daily Missions and Symbolic Rewards, provided a balanced structure between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation to promote acquisition and skill mastery, as proposed by motivation theories such as Self-Determination, Achievement-Goal and Expectancy-Value. Likewise, participants evidenced immersion and Flow while engaging in the activities, allowing them enjoyment as well as high concentration levels. Moreover, agency was found as a key result of the implementation of Daily Missions which allowed students to establish personal and collective goals. It also gave students the sense of control about their own progress which contributed to autonomous work and development. Finally, the teacher's role was highlighted as fundamental throughout the implementation. Participants agreed that it was not only the game mechanics, but the teacher's general attitude and enthusiasm which continuously encouraged them to engage in writing tasks. Furthermore, students also agreed that the teachers' knowledge was crucial too in the gamified experience. As previous studies mentioned, a solid knowledge of game design is needed, however, participants also mentioned the importance of considering their own interest and creating a personalized environment that allowed surprise, expectation and fun.

Although implementation results and participants' perceptions are positive, there are still limitations to consider. For example, the number of participants is limited and may not represent the overall perception of the larger group. Considering that, more exhaustive research could be conducted with more resources and time for implementation and analysis.

Future research could investigate the long-term effects of non-digital gamification on academic writing skills, particularly in diverse cultural and socioeconomic contexts. Additionally, exploring the potential of non-digital gamification in other areas of language acquisition, such as speaking or reading comprehension, could provide valuable insights into the versatility of gamified approaches in language education. Finally, further studies examining the specific teacher behaviours and strategies that enhance gamification effectiveness could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how to implement gamified curricula across various educational settings. Ultimately, future research should look into statistical results that provide evidence on the real effectiveness of gamified courses and learning/acquisition.

This research contributes to the broader understanding of gamification in education from the students' perspective, emphasizing the importance of teacher involvement, adaptability, and the sustainable application of non-digital gamification principles. Through its focus on non-digital gamification, this study provides a framework for future research on alternative gamified methods that can make academic writing instruction more inclusive, engaging, and impactful for students worldwide.

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