

Enhancing Student Motivation through Game-Based Learning and Meaningful Classroom Interactions in English Courses at Centro de Estudios de Idiomas Conversacionales

Ericka Hernández Salazar¹

Universidad Nacional

Costa Rica

ericka.alejandra0126@gmail.com

Abstract

This essay explores how game-based learning (GBL) and meaningful classroom interactions can enhance student motivation in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses, particularly within diverse contexts like Centro de Estudios de Idiomas Conversacionales (CEIC). The central thesis asserts that combining these strategies fosters motivation. Drawing on frameworks such as Self-Determination Theory and the L2 Motivational Self System, the essay emphasizes the value of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Key arguments include the adaptability of GBL (both digital and analog), the need for contextualized teaching based on learner profiles and digital literacy, and the importance of fostering respectful teacher-student and peer relationships. The conclusions highlight that well-structured GBL and supportive interactions can increase intrinsic motivation, foster classroom belonging, and reduce anxiety. Ultimately, the essay emphasizes the importance of analyzing learners' needs and profiles to design relevant and responsive strategies that promote engagement in mixed-age EFL classrooms.

Keywords: Classroom Interaction, English as a Foreign Language, Game-Based Learning, Mixed-Age Groups, Student Motivation

¹ English teacher at the Centro de Estudios de Idiomas Conversacionales (CEIC), Universidad Nacional, and language acquisition teacher in the International Baccalaureate Primary and Middle Years Programmes. Holds a Bachelor's degree in English Teaching from Universidad Nacional and is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Education with an emphasis on English Language Learning at Universidad Nacional.

Introduction

Motivation is a complex but essential factor in the language learning process. While it can seem abstract, it is something many educators deeply long for in their students. For the purpose of this essay, motivation is defined as the internal drive that leads learners to engage with and persist in language learning, and it involves both effort and purpose, shaped by personal goals and the learning environment, including classroom dynamics and social interactions (Gardner, 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Understanding how to support and sustain this motivation is key for crafting meaningful and engaging experiences for second language learners.

At Centro de Estudios de Idiomas Conversacionales (CEIC), an external linkage program of Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica, motivation becomes especially relevant due to the diversity of its student population. CEIC offers a 13-level English program, including two levels focused on pronunciation and a final one centered on conversational skills. While children are placed in separate groups, adolescents and adults often share the same classroom, creating a dynamic mix of ages, personal objectives, backgrounds, and proficiency levels. Additionally, the institution offers both regular and intensive courses, in virtual and in-person formats, which requires instructors to adapt their approaches to meet varied learner needs.

While CEIC's learner diversity enriches the classroom environment, it can also pose challenges for enhancing motivation. Variations in age, prior experience, and learning pace may impact students' sense of progress and connection, which are key components of motivation as defined earlier. As such, it is important to identify strategies that cater to this heterogeneity, ensuring that all students feel supported throughout the learning process.

Therefore, maintaining student motivation in diverse classrooms requires strategies that make learning interactive, meaningful, and enjoyable. Two effective approaches that contribute to this are Game-Based Learning (GBL) and purposeful classroom interactions. GBL refers to the use of analog (non-digital) or digital games designed or adapted with specific educational objectives. These are commonly associated with features such as collaboration, problem-solving, communication, and, at times, competition (Reinhardt & Thorne, 2020; Plass et al., 2015; Plass et al., 2020). At CEIC, instructors are granted flexibility to tailor activities to the varied needs of students. Thus, this adaptability allows GBL to be adjusted for different proficiency levels by offering varied roles or tasks, enabling all learners to participate meaningfully. Moreover, the social and collaborative dimensions of games can enhance learners' emotional connection to the classroom, which is particularly valuable at CEIC, where

fostering a supportive and motivating environment is essential given the range of student profiles.

Interaction, meanwhile, represents another dimension of the classroom experience that is closely tied to motivation. According to Brown and Lee (2015) interaction is “the collaborative exchange of thoughts, feelings, or ideas between two or more people” (p. 259). Considering the aforementioned contribution, the following definition is proposed for this composition: classroom interactions refer to the verbal or non-verbal exchanges that take place between teachers and students or among peers, whether these occur intentionally or emerge spontaneously. Since such interactions are unavoidable in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom setting, it becomes particularly relevant to consider them when discussing student motivation. In fact, rather than being merely a passive or spontaneous part of the lesson, classroom interaction can be intentionally designed to support learners emotionally and cognitively, helping sustain their motivation over time and reinforce social integration.

Thereby, this essay argues that combining game-based learning with intentional classroom interaction can effectively support and sustain motivation in CEIC’s EFL classrooms and similar EFL settings. To support this claim, the essay examines relevant theoretical frameworks and outlines key considerations for implementing these strategies in ways that promote inclusive, engaging, and motivating learning environments. While doing so, it provides educators with essential insights they can adapt to the specific needs, profiles, and dynamics of their own classrooms.

Motivation in EFL Contexts

A common question language educators ask when becoming acquainted with students is: why do you want to learn the language? Even if such a question might be easily perceived as a lightweight icebreaker with little to no thought behind it, the reality is quite different since gaining insight into students' rationale represents a meaningful way to have a better understanding of the student population one will be working with to grasp their wants and needs. Understanding the reasons for which a particular individual chooses to learn a new language can be beneficial to establish strategies that accompany their goals. Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that the orientations that make learners study a new language do not necessarily imply that they will be able to become motivated. Indeed, Gardner (1985) established a clear distinction between orientation and motivation stressing that

Orientation refers to a class of reasons for learning a second language. Motivation refers to a complex of three characteristics which may not be related to any particular

orientation. These characteristics are attitudes toward learning the language, desire to learn the language and motivational intensity (p. 54).

However, it is impossible to deny that orientations may influence motivation even if not guaranteed. Hence, addressing the why behind learning a new language may lead to a correlation between orientations and sustained motivation. Gardner (2007) established that “the teacher, the class atmosphere, the course content, materials and facilities, as well as personal characteristics of the student (such as studiousness, etc.,) will have an influence on the individual’s classroom learning motivation” (p.11). Within CEIC, where students vary widely in age, learning goals, and personal circumstances, such contextual influences are particularly relevant. Furthermore, significant responsibility for student’s motivation can also be placed upon educators as they are the ones who facilitate lessons and hold the threads when it comes to the creation of the lesson plans and evaluations. Therefore, teachers who work in diverse classrooms must be aware that their own planning and responsiveness may directly affect learners’ motivation.

Ryan and Deci’s Self-Determination Theory (SDT) further elaborates on motivation by considering its extrinsic and intrinsic constructs. Understanding SDT is valuable for educators to assimilate the relevance of the need for autonomy in lesson planning and class facilitation in order to contribute to motivating students. Ryan and Deci (2000) explained that intrinsic motivation is impelled by authentic interest and fulfils our needs for competence and autonomy, making it fully self-determined. Extrinsic motivation, though aimed at external outcomes, can become more self-determined through internalization and integration. Hence, facilitators must design lessons that connect with real-life situations and cultivate a classroom atmosphere where students feel empowered to make choices and express their ideas. This sense of autonomy is essential for nurturing motivation driven by personal relevance and interest, as explained by Ryan and Deci. In a setting like CEIC, providing opportunities for choice and self-expression not only encourages greater participation but also strengthens learners’ emotional connection to the learning process.

Lastly, according to Dörnyei (2014), L2 motivation can be understood through a three-part model known as the L2 Motivational Self System, which was proposed by the same author. Dörnyei continued to explain that it includes the Ideal L2 Self, representing the learner’s internal aspiration of who they want to become as an L2 user, the Ought-to L2 Self, illustrating the qualities one feels obliged to develop because of outside expectations, and the L2 Learning Experience, depicting the motives that arise from the students’ current environment and experiences. At CEIC, teachers must address students’ varied aspirations. For instance, some

learners may be driven by a desire to study abroad (Ideal L2 Self), while others may feel pressure to learn English for work (Ought-to L2 Self). Helping students visualize their future selves and connect daily classroom experiences to those goals can strengthen their engagement.

Even though this section presents three major theoretical models related to second language motivation, the intention is not to argue in favor of one over the others. Instead, the goal is to highlight these perspectives as valuable references that can serve as a foundation for educators to reflect on and decide which model may best fit the needs of their specific group. In a context like CEIC, it becomes difficult and even limiting to generalize or favor a single theory since what works well with one group may not resonate with another.

What is important to emphasize, however, is that all of these models, despite using different terminology, share a common concern for helping learners engage with the language learning process in a personally meaningful way. Whether it is Gardner's notion of the relevance of the learning environment, Ryan and Deci's emphasis on autonomy and internalization, or Dörnyei's focus on the learner's ideal self, each perspective points toward the importance of students finding personal value and relevance in their learning. Based on my teaching experience at CEIC, when students feel that what they are learning aligns with their goals or interests, their engagement and persistence tend to increase. For that reason, rather than promoting a fixed approach, this section presents a range of theoretical tools that educators can draw on and adapt to foster more purposeful and student-centered classes.

Game-Based Learning (GBL) and Its Impact on Motivation

Games are often associated with children, parties, or even just hobbies, but depending on the complexity and intention of the game, it can serve different educational purposes that address the interests and needs of people from different ages, and they could potentially improve motivation in the classroom. There is often a misconception between the concepts of gamification and GBL, Deterding et al. (2011) proposed that "'Gamification' is the use of game design elements in non-game contexts" (p. 10). In contrast, Cornellà et al. (2020) asserted that at its core, GBL uses games as a medium for learning; thus, the game becomes a tool through which specific concepts can be explored and internalized. Whether during gameplay or upon its completion, teachers are encouraged to guide reflection on both the experience itself, and the educational content being addressed. Importantly, despite their differences, both approaches can enhance participation, encourage persistence, and support meaningful learning when thoughtfully implemented.

Having established this difference, it is pivotal to understand that both gamification and GBL aim at boosting motivation, but the process of each is quite different, which does not mean that one is more effective than the other; the use of one or the other depends on the educational purpose. For instance, Plass (2019) noted that gamification mostly uses extrinsic rewards and the overall task prevails mostly unaltered while GBL utilizes a complete range of game features and does require modifications and redesigning to make it more appealing and engaging. Hence, in this essay the focus is on GBL due the malleability it allows to adapt the game to the content, creating a meaningful learning experience for students in mixed-aged settings.

Games can be far more complex than one might assume. Think about the game called Mafia, which is often played at parties. Its main premise relies on a battle of deceit and deduction between two groups: the Mafia and the civilians. The Mafia acts in secret in order to eliminate the civilians one by one without being discovered, while the civilians must work together to identify and vote out the Mafia members. This game is a perfect example of how role-playing can be incorporated into GBL to create a space where students immerse themselves in socially meaningful interactions, engage in real-time negotiation and persuasion, and strategize with their classmates, all while using the target language. Such game dynamics reflect CEIC's commitment to a student-centered approach by promoting active involvement from learners who might not usually participate in traditional formats, thereby fostering a more inclusive and responsive classroom culture.

A digital example of a game that can be effective for learning is Minecraft, as it can motivate students through open-ended activities that encourage independence. Its immersive and cooperative features promote participation and communication, and its adaptability allows educators to customize lessons to students' interests; for instance, at CEIC, particularly in earlier levels, students could collaborate by building and labeling parts of a house to practice vocabulary related to rooms, furniture, and prepositions of place. In addition, more tech-savvy learners, often those with prior gaming experience, can be intentionally paired with those who may struggle more. This not only supports peer learning but also promotes inclusive participation, and this type of activity combines creativity with purposeful language use in a meaningful and contextualized environment.

Salen and Zimmerman (2004) established, "Playing a game means making choices and taking actions. All of this activity occurs within a game-system designed to support meaningful kinds of choice-making. Every action taken results in a change affecting the overall system of the game" (p.58). Therefore, game dynamics can mirror real-life situations in which communication and interactions are co-related and learners experience outcomes while they

need to keep pushing forward. This highlights how games can be powerful tools for immersive and authentic engagement. Importantly, because games are highly modifiable, they offer a malleability that allows teachers to adapt them to specific content and learner needs. This flexibility makes it possible to work collaboratively with students to design or adjust games accordingly, strengthening the teacher-student communication at CEIC. GBL, therefore, not only draws on a full range of game elements but also encourages creativity and co-construction of experiences, making it an appealing strategy for improving motivation.

Digital Game-Based Learning (DGBL) offers a range of benefits. Szegedine (2020) remarked that when digital games mimic real-world situations, promote problem-solving, and convey reality in varied ways that cater to students' interest, they can effectively support learning. Building on this idea, digital games create opportunities for immersive learning experiences that go beyond traditional formats by allowing pupils to interact with language in dynamic, engaging contexts. Moreover, depending on the learners and their interests, DGBL can be highly rewarding and motivating as they also consider varied learning styles. Besides their entertaining features, digital games offer structured environments where students can actively apply language, take risks, and explore content in ways that feel relevant and personalized.

Just as digital games have their own benefits, analog games do as well. For example, they do not require the use of technology, which makes them more accessible and inclusive in a wide range of contexts, especially in face-to-face settings. For instance, CEIC focuses on conversational competence, so analog games represent powerful tools for promoting negotiation of meaning, particularly in in-person classes. In fact, Maratou et al. (2023) conducted interviews with educators and game designers across Europe, and the authors expressed, "The interviewees confirmed that analogue GBL promotes a variety of soft skills that otherwise are hard to induce using traditional methods of teaching. These skills could include collaboration and communication, creativity, problem-solving, and decision-making" (p.80). The face-to-face nature of analog games fosters immediate social interaction, cooperation, and emotional connection, all of which are important to promote motivation, and they are also pivotal for improving language proficiency.

When designing, adopting or adapting a game, many aspects must be considered. For example, establishing an effective goal is fundamental. In fact, Salen and Zimmerman (2004) mentioned, "The goal is the ostensible reason for playing, but the goal is never easily attained; rather, it is the obscure object of desire, the carrot held just out of reach, pulling players forward through the varied pleasures of game play" (p. 342). Aspects such as objectives or even

narratives can make a difference in the investment of students in the game and their motivation to participate in it. Additionally, the culture of “failure” in games is something to consider in the design. Ryan and Rigby (2020) highlighted, “Punishments for failure in games are usually small and temporary—in schools and organizations, they can be demeaning and costly. Instead of punishing repeated efforts, games reward retries and persistence. Educators have much to learn from games’ less controlling frameworks” (170). Based on my personal classroom observations at CEIC, adult learners often experience greater anxiety around failure, driven by the fear of being judged. Hence, introducing games can help reduce this anxiety by reframing failure as a normal and valuable part of the learning process. It is essential for educators to communicate this perspective clearly so that students begin to see setbacks not as personal shortcomings, but as opportunities for growth and improvement.

Student-Teacher Interactions and Their Impact on Motivation

Interactions are unavoidable in a classroom setting, and instead of attempting to vanish them in the classroom, educators must take advantage of them to strengthen the teaching and learning processes. If one places oneself in a classroom, two main interactions or moments of contact are likely to occur: teacher-student and peer interactions, both of which are equally important. van Herpen et al. (2024) found that positive relationships with teachers and peers during the first time frame increased study effort and engagement, which remained strong in the second time frame, ultimately enhancing academic performance. Thus, as students and teachers cooperate, they build rapport, which can increase their intrinsic motivation and sense of belonging in the classroom

According to Henry and Thorsen (2018), “In a contact moment, no matter how fleeting it might be, the teacher and student become present to one another, and open and willing for a connection to take place” (p. 219). Considering the amount of time spent with learners, it is important to make them feel safe and avoid attitudes that may hinder the learning process and motivation, such as dismissing students' contributions, or applying excessive correction without encouragement. Indeed, Ryan and Deci (2000) argued that when students perceive their teachers as supportive and respectful, they are more likely to adopt the goals and expectations set within the classroom. In this light, cultivating emotionally supportive relationships can become a foundation for student motivation and a deeper sense of belonging. Moreover, positive interactions not only foster better classroom dynamics but also help learners view challenges as opportunities rather than threats, ultimately deepening their commitment and persistence in language learning tasks. Additionally, from my personal experience, it is also natural to feel more attuned to certain students than others, depending on personality,

background, or communication style. Being mindful of these tendencies is essential to ensure that all students receive equitable attention and support, regardless of how easily a connection is formed.

Peer Interactions and Their Impact on Motivation

The relationships students develop with their peers are central to both their motivation and overall learning experience. A classroom environment that fosters collaboration and mutual support nurtures a stronger sense of relatedness, making students feel more connected and engaged. As Cantillano (2024) explained, involving students in group discussions, collaborative problem-solving, and peer interactions enhances their grasp of the language and fosters motivation. In turn, these shared experiences allow students to encourage one another, reinforcing both their linguistic skills and their confidence throughout the learning process.

When discussing the factors that influence motivation in EFL settings, one must acknowledge that although teacher-student rapport is valuable, it represents only one of the many aspects to be considered in a classroom setting. For instance, Sayyad (2024) concluded that while teacher-student rapport is significant, it may not necessarily be the most critical factor influencing classroom engagement and interaction. Instead, other aspects, including institutional training practices, effective classroom management strategies, and peer relationships, may exert a stronger influence on student participation and overall classroom dynamics. Thus, it is essential for educators and researchers to adopt a holistic approach, considering all the dynamics that happen in class to make them as positive as possible. This perspective aligns with the need to consider not only teacher influence but also the role of peer interactions and classroom culture, particularly in mixed-aged groups.

Based on my own classroom experience at CEIC, I have observed that students across a wide age range sometimes struggle to connect due to differing interests, energy levels, or classroom attitudes. For instance, some adult learners have expressed frustration with the behavior of teenagers, as teens tend to group with peers their own age, while adults often gravitate toward other adults. However, when interactions are not left to chance but are instead encouraged through well-planned tasks and purposeful grouping, collaboration tends to improve. Learners often discover they have more in common than expected and begin to adapt their communication to work more effectively with one another, which ultimately makes the classroom environment more enjoyable and inclusive.

Further, in-person interaction continues to offer distinct advantages in language learning settings, especially when the goal is to promote communication and real-time collaboration. Gao and Shi (2023) found that in face-to-face classes, students were better able to read body

language, which fostered cooperation and comfort in communication, and they also had the advantage of easily forming groups, making friends, and accessing the teacher for help. Thus, having cues can help reduce tension and support more balanced participation. That said, in virtual environments, it becomes especially important to design opportunities for real-time interaction, like breakout rooms, for students to experience some of the immediacy and social connection typically found in physical classrooms.

While positive peer interaction can enhance motivation and classroom engagement, the opposite is equally true: negative social dynamics can significantly hinder motivation. Furrer et al. (2014) stated, “Coercive interactions with classroom peers (e.g., pressure to cheat, not appear “too smart,” withhold views for fear of rejection) can erode participation and damage feelings of safety and acceptance in the classroom” (p.109). Thus, such dynamics can undermine the psychological need for relatedness and potentially prevent learners from expressing themselves at their fullest. Since CEIC favors spoken interaction and participation, this sense of relatedness is particularly important. If students do not feel comfortable or accepted by their peers, they may hesitate to engage in communicative tasks, especially those that require personal input or collaboration. For this reason, it becomes increasingly important to restate the value of intentional interaction design in the classroom, where grouping strategies and collaborative tasks are planned not just for content coverage but also to support emotional safety and inclusion.

Essential Considerations for Implementing Game-Based Learning and Fostering Classroom Interaction

Implementing GBL and fostering meaningful classroom interaction within CEIC’s program requires careful attention to mediation, technology use, social dynamics, and student agency. Each of these dimensions can significantly influence how students engage with learning and sustain motivation. In terms of mediation, some of my students have shared that in other levels they have taken, lessons do not always feel centered around their needs, even though that is the intended approach. Regarding technology, while digital tools are available, not all learners feel confident using them. Moreover, socially, many students are not used to interacting with peers during lessons, particularly if they come from more traditional learning backgrounds. In addition, some of my students have mentioned that student agency is not always actively encouraged. Therefore, to ensure that GBL and classroom interaction truly support motivation, the following components must be considered.

Establishing Clear Objectives

Establishing a clearly defined learning objective is important to guide instruction and foster motivation. When both educators and pupils understand the goal behind a game, such as practicing a specific grammar structure, expanding vocabulary, or improving fluency, they are more likely to have meaningful participation. Clark and Nguyen (2020) explained, “The actions, consequences, and feedback of a game should be congruent with learning objectives or desired performance outcomes” (p. 472). Making learning goals explicit not only clarifies the purpose of the activity but also supports mediation, as it centers instruction around learners and shows them how the task contributes to their progress. For example, a scavenger hunt can reinforce vocabulary by helping students form visual and tangible associations with target words. Learning objectives give the game direction and relevance, showing students that their efforts contribute to growth. Without clear goals, games may become merely superficial or fail to encourage language development. Thereby, articulating specific, achievable goals transforms games into motivating tools that promote both enjoyment and purposeful language use.

Profiling Learners and Evaluating Digital Literacy Skills

Another pivotal step to consider before implementing GBL activities is identifying learners’ backgrounds, needs, and learning contexts. This includes assessing language proficiency, learning goals, Digital Literacy (DL), as well as, students’ interests and preferences. By understanding the learners’ profile, educators can craft inclusive and engaging experiences. In addition, classroom interactions are central to GBL; games that boost collaboration, turn-taking, and collaborative problem-solving create authentic opportunities for meaningful and contextual communication. Such interactional dynamics are essential not only for language development but also for sustaining learner motivation, which can lead to high levels of engagement and increased student retention within the CEIC program.

DL is also decisive for GBL as it affects whether a game should be digital or analog, and how complex it can be. According to Nguyen and Habók (2022), “DL can be understood as the knowledge, skills, and attitude needed when handling technological devices to create, communicate, collaborate, search, and evaluate the information for specific purposes in the digital era” (p. 55). Therefore, DL involves more than being able to use technological tools; in fact, it requires an intentional, ethical, and critical use of digital resources. Nguyen and Habók (2022) also found that, despite widespread access to digital devices and generally positive attitudes toward technology, students’ actual use of digital tools for language learning remained limited. This finding highlights a critical distinction: students may be digitally connected but not digitally competent.

Considering the above, digital game selection must be based on a realistic understanding of learners' DL profiles. In fact, through my own experience implementing game-based learning with digital tools, I faced a learning curve that made me realize the importance of starting with simple interfaces, providing clear progressive instructions, building on existing knowledge, and offering timely support to prevent cognitive overload and disengagement, ensuring a supportive environment for all learners.

Providing Effective Scaffolding

Scaffolding is essential for making GBL and classroom interactions effective and inclusive, particularly in varied EFL groups since learners in these settings often differ in language proficiency and confidence. Bruner (1978) described scaffolding as the support a caregiver provides by simplifying tasks, focusing attention, and modeling language, allowing the child to participate in communication. He also noted a process called "extension," where the caregiver broadens the contexts and functions in which language is used. In the context of classroom games and classroom interactions, this can be translated to clearly explaining rules, breaking down guidelines into manageable steps, and demonstrating expected interactions before the activity begins.

In interactive tasks such as pair work, group discussions, or roleplays, scaffolding also involves providing language tools like conversation starters, visual prompts, or even vocabulary banks. These supports enable learners to focus on using the target language rather than figuring out what to say or how to engage. Without instructional clarity and proper support, activities risk confusion or unequal participation. Scaffolding ensures that both games and classroom interactions foster meaningful language practice in a supportive, low-anxiety environment.

Applying the Principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework offers a valuable approach to designing instructions that are both accessible and inclusive. One core principle of UDL is providing multiple means of engagement, referring to the affective connection learners create with the learning experience. Thus, students are more willing to participate when the tasks are related to their identities, interests and when they can establish connections with their personal lives. To achieve this, it could be useful to ask learners for their preferences and suggestions to adapt the games to their interests. In addition, providing students with the chance to choose game roles gives them a sense of autonomy. As the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST, 2024) noted, when students are invited to bring their authentic selves into the classroom, they become more emotionally invested and engaged in learning. Thereby, creating

choices and personalized games and classroom interactions support motivation by creating a sense of agency needed to support students' personal goals.

Another principle of UDL is providing multiple means of representation, which refers to presenting information through various formats to address the different ways in which learners process and make sense of information (CAST, 2024). For instance, written instructions can be paired with audio recordings, graphic representations, oral explanations, gestures or live demonstrations to help students grasp game rules and/or instructions better, this is particularly important given the varied linguistic levels often present in a single classroom, a situation frequently encountered at CEIC. Moreover, color-coded materials, cue cards, and glossaries can help reduce cognitive overload, allowing all learners to better grasp and follow the rules of the game without feeling overwhelmed.

Finally, UDL's third principle, multiple means of action and expression, focuses on diversifying the ways in which students are able to demonstrate their understanding and communicate their ideas. In games, this can be supported by offering flexible response options, which is feasible given that CEIC grants teachers the autonomy to mediate their classrooms as they find suitable. In fact, digital platforms like Genially can also support this flexibility through the incorporation of multiple response modes within a single game. For example, in a Genially board game students might land on a space that prompts them to choose between answering a grammar question, performing a challenge, or finding an object in the classroom; all tasks designed to activate different types of learning.

Choosing Between Analog and Digital Games: Context Matters

Analog and digital games offer different advantages and limitations, but both can be valuable tools for promoting motivation in the classroom. Moreover, they can be effectively combined with classroom interactions to foster engagement and participation. However, the decision to use one format over the other depends entirely on the context, such as the characteristics of the learner population and whether the class is face-to-face, virtual, or hybrid. As it was previously mentioned, in settings with mixed-age groups, the facilitator must have a clear understanding of students' profiles, needs, and preferences. For this reason, Table 1 presents a comparison of the features of both types of games to support educators in making informed and context-appropriate choices.

Table 1

Game-Based Learning in EFL: Key Features of Analog and Digital Games

Category	Analog Games	Digital Games
Resource Availability	They do not require technological devices, rely on affordable materials	They require access to digital devices (e.g., tablets, laptops, or smartphones),

	such as dice, cards, boards, and printed visuals, and do not need internet access, making them ideal for low-resource contexts.	online platforms, and often a stable internet connection, particularly for multiplayer games.
Interactions	They encourage physical interaction, movement, and peer collaboration, while also promoting social-emotional learning through negotiation, turn-taking, and shared decision-making. Additionally, they often support whole-class engagement by incorporating team-based dynamics.	They allow for solo, pair, or group play, and can be either synchronous or asynchronous depending on the platform. Participation is adaptable to each learner's pace and to various class formats, whether face-to-face or online. In virtual classes, these games can facilitate interactive learning experiences despite the physical distance.
Contribution to Motivation	They promote active participation and meaningful peer interaction through hands-on tasks. As students are able to rely on one another in real time, the learning environment becomes less intimidating, which helps build confidence.	Digital games enhance motivation by integrating interactive challenges within immersive environments. Also, elements such as rewards and leaderboards tend to boost extrinsic motivation, while problem-solving tasks embedded in meaningful game scenarios foster intrinsic motivation by making the learning experience enjoyable, engaging, and stimulating.
Adaptability & Accessibility	They are highly flexible and can be created from scratch using simple, low-cost materials, or adapted to align activities with learners' real-life contexts and experiences. Additionally, tasks can be adjusted in real time based on students' participation and evolving needs, fostering a more responsive and personalized learning environment.	Many digital platforms allow for the customization of content, difficulty levels, and visual design. Depending on the platform, accessibility features such as subtitles, audio narration, embedded videos, and visual cues can support diverse learners by offering multiple ways of accessing and processing information. However, ensuring true inclusivity requires evaluating whether the digital game is appropriate for the specific

		needs and realities of the group, making sure it does not unintentionally reinforce existing inequalities
Classroom Setting	They are best suited for physical classrooms that allow space for movement, discussion, and face-to-face interaction. These games can be seamlessly integrated into learning stations or group-based activities.	They are adaptable to face-to-face, blended, and virtual environments; however, their implementation in face-to-face settings depends on the resources available at the institution.
Digital Literacy	They do not rely on digital skills, making them accessible to all learners regardless of their technological background. They allow students to focus on interpersonal communication, collaboration, and spoken interaction.	They require a basic level of digital competence to navigate instructions, interact with the platform, and complete tasks. While this can be challenging for some learners, it also offers valuable opportunities to build digital skills that are increasingly essential in today's world.
Teacher Monitoring	They allow teachers to easily observe interactions, clarify rules in real time, and provide immediate verbal feedback. This facilitates differentiated support based on students' needs, while peer feedback emerges organically.	Monitoring in digital games often depends on the features available within each platform. Teachers might need to intentionally plan moments for feedback, reflection, and clarification, as these may not occur naturally during gameplay. Also, some platforms include progress tracking tools, which can support formative assessment.
Scaffolding Options	Support strategies include visual aids, sentence stems, cue cards, and task cards adapted to varying proficiency levels. The teacher's physical presence enables real-time modeling and prompting.	Built-in scaffolding features like hints, tiered levels, adaptive feedback, glossaries, or replay functions can guide learners at their own pace. Customizable scaffolds promote learner autonomy and differentiated instruction.
Examples	Classic games: Charades, Pictionary, Bingo, Taboo, Tic-Tac-Toe with prompts.	Quiz-based: Blooket, Quizizz, Wordwall, Baamboozle.

Interactive storytelling: Storytelling dice, roleplays, escape rooms.	Simulation and exploration: Minecraft, The Sims, Animal Crossing.
Collaborative tasks: Jigsaw puzzles, scavenger hunts, classroom rallies, Mafia.	Creative and social: Digital escape rooms, Gartic Phone, Jeopardy- style games.

Note. Own creation.

It is imperative to keep in mind that although digital literacy may initially appear as a limitation, it can actually become an opportunity when students have access to the necessary resources. In such cases, educators can begin introducing digital tools gradually, helping learners develop the skills to use technology critically, responsibly, and ethically. At the same time, while digital tools can be incredibly powerful, it's just as important to diversify our strategies. Ideally, both analog and digital games should be included, when possible, as each offers different ways to enhance classroom interaction. Interestingly, in today's tech-saturated environments, students are often so accustomed to screens that returning to more traditional, unplugged games can actually feel refreshing.

Conclusions

Given the complexity of teaching in environments like CEIC, where age gaps and learner diversity are the norm, motivating students demands mediation strategies that break away from traditional instruction. This essay has synthesized how GBL and meaningful classroom interactions can serve as powerful tools to cultivate engagement, persistence, and a sense of community among learners. In fact, it was established that GBL allows instructors to create playful and purposeful learning settings where both teenagers and adults can participate at their own level, and it helps learners negotiate meaning, collaborate, engage, and promote creativity and autonomy regardless of differences. Likewise, intentional classroom interactions can promote meaningful participation among students who might otherwise hesitate to engage due to confidence gaps or social barriers.

Moreover, theoretical frameworks such as Self-Determination Theory and the L2 Motivational Self System reinforce the importance of autonomy, relatedness, and personal relevance. This essay encourages to address motivational needs at CEIC and similar contexts through the intentional use of adaptable games and interaction strategies that respond to learners' varied profiles, stressing that if implemented thoughtfully, these approaches do not just entertain; they actively support motivation.

Additionally, a key distinction emphasized throughout the essay lies between gamification and GBL. While both aim to increase engagement, gamification often relies on

game elements and external rewards within otherwise unchanged tasks, whereas GBL entails full integration of games into the learning process, offering deeper opportunities for autonomy and competence. This differentiation becomes critical in classroom design, based on the needs of each group and whether the aim is to foster an internal or external drive.

Another crucial element is the choice between analog and digital games, which depends heavily on learner profiles, access to resources, and format. As shown in Table 1, analog games can foster spontaneous interaction, social bonding, and reduce technological barriers, which makes them ideal for CEIC's in-person classes. Digital games, on the other hand, offer immersive environments and can promote autonomy and creativity, particularly when DL is scaffolded appropriately. The choice is not about privileging one over the other but about identifying what aligns best with the students' context. Interestingly, even students accustomed to screens often find unplugged games refreshing and engaging when purposefully implemented. Moreover, the cultural dimension of failure in games was addressed as a transformative element, especially for adult learners who often fear judgment. By reframing failure as experimentation, games can help normalize mistakes and support perseverance in language learning.

Likewise, intentional classroom interactions emerged as a crucial factor in motivating learners. At CEIC, where students may initially struggle to connect across age lines, meaningful interaction through structured tasks can improve collaboration and classroom cohesion. In peer dynamics, designing inclusive grouping and fostering emotional safety can help learners feel more comfortable participating, particularly when sharing personal experiences or expressing themselves in the L2. Likewise, teacher-student interactions that are respectful, encouraging, and responsive help students feel seen and supported, reinforcing their willingness to engage and persist in learning tasks.

Importantly, the role of educators as facilitators of interaction and motivation is central. Applying UDL principles, offering scaffolding, and understanding learners' DL levels are essential steps in creating engaging, accessible, and relevant experiences for all students. These actions help ensure that motivation is not left to chance but deliberately cultivated. Overall, this essay reinforces that GBL and intentional classroom interaction are not peripheral activities, but central strategies for building motivating and inclusive environments at CEIC. To support their equitable and effective implementation, continued teacher development and institutional backing are crucial. Future studies could explore the long-term impact of these strategies on learner autonomy and L2 identity development.

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