

More Than Child's Play: Tackling Speech Anxiety Among Malaysian ESL Learners Through Gamification

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ABSTRACT

When second language learners have language anxiety especially when they are using the speaking skills, they are more likely to experience anxiety, self-doubt, frustration, and fear that will affect their ability to learn the languages. However, based on previous research, it is shown that learners' anxiety over public speaking significantly decreased when gamification was included in the classroom. Therefore, in this study, the main objective was to explore the students' perception towards the gamification setting in reducing speech anxiety among UiTM students. The study employs a quantitative study with 221 participants consisting of undergraduates from various faculties in UiTM. A descriptive analysis was used to analyze the data. From the results, it is found that most of the students experienced a level of anxiety in the beginning despite using the virtual gamification setting. However, they believe that the virtual speech application helped them in getting an improved positive experience when delivering a speech, particularly in easing their anxiousness upon speaking in front of an audience.

Keywords: speech anxiety, English as a Second Language (ESL), gamification, virtual reality



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1. INTRODUCTION

Numerous aspects of human existence are enhanced by effective communication and throughout history, many cultures around the world have created several languages as their unique ways of communicating (Hwa & Peck, 2017). It is further elaborated that there is no denying that English is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world and has grown to play a significant part in it. Nevertheless, one of the major issues preventing second-language speakers from using their second language is language anxiety (Lyu, 2019).

When the students have language anxiety in which they have negative attitudes towards learning the target language which is the English language, they are more likely to experience anxiety, self-doubt, frustration, and fear that will affect their ability to learn the languages, which in turn will have an impact on their psychological well-being (Darmi & Albion, 2014). However, it is further explained that the students will participate more actively in class and be more ready to engage in the educational activities if they remain positive throughout the language-learning process and as a result, each individual student achieves success in language learning as well as successful language acquisition.

Despite having language anxiety, speaking skill is one of the most problematic skills that the students need to encounter when they are learning the English language which exposes them to the speaking or speech anxiety. Speaking anxiety has been found to negatively affect English language

learners in higher education who participate in both in-class and extracurricular speaking activities (Ahmed et al., 2017; Elald, 2016; Hasrul et al., 2013; Mohammad et al., 2016; Saranraj & Meenakshi, 2016 as cited in Badrasawi et al., 2020).

However, based on a study done by Abadi et al. (2022) showed that the participants' anxiety over public speaking significantly decreased when the gamification was included in the class which shows the significance of the gamification in reducing the speech anxiety. Not just that, to follow the current educational environment which is more on the integration of the technologies, the higher education should be able to adapt to the new educational environment by using gamification as one of the teaching-learning strategies as the students are now more to digital natives (Castillo-Parra et al., 2022). It is further added that through gamification will also generate other skills which are important to our educational expectations such as commitment skills, motivation, and enthusiasm in what they are studying.

Moreover, the field of gamification has advanced more quickly during the last few years and it has now been integrated into our educational setting despite it was once thought of as fun, interaction and used for entertainment only (Wongpinunwatana & Maneerattanasak' 2020; as cited in Sharifah et al., 2022). In addition, more gamified designs based on mobile technology and artificial intelligence have also been applied to teaching practice over the past ten years as educational technology has also been advanced. (Chen et al., 2022). Therefore, the primary aim of this study was to investigate how UiTM students perceive the use of gamification as a mean to alleviate speech anxiety. To gain insights into the potential impact of gamification on reducing speech anxiety among UiTM students, the following research question was formulated: What is the students' perception of the effectiveness of gamification in reducing speech anxiety among UiTM students?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Dominance Is Placing the English Language as Lingua Franca for Globalization

Alongside discussions surrounding challenges and opportunities, one particular dimension explored is framed around terminology such as "lingua franca," "English as an International Language (EIL)" and "English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)". Eoyang calls into question the usage of 'lingua franca' asserting that it connotes a conglomeration of impure languages (Llurda, 2004).

Nevertheless, proponents advocate for greater attention to be afforded to the extensive prevalence of English as a lingua franca amongst international communicators (Louhiala Salminen & Kankaanranta. 2011). They prefer to label this phenomenon as English Lingua Franca (ELF) thereby underscoring its central role within professional global business communication. English dominance as a lingua franca also garners discussions concerning language policies pursued by non-English speaking countries. This analysis underscores the influence exerted by globalization and English reach on these policies. While English may not be their native tongue it functions as an indispensable medium for facilitating globalization (Kırkgöz, 2008). Additionally, endeavours geared toward upholding the primacy of global English are further scrutinized alongside the concept of linguistic neo imperialism (Phillipson, 2012).

The tension between English and local languages is another aspect of the discussion. English as the lingua franca is, on one side, regarded as beneficial for enabling global reach and local languages that provide a better cultural fit (Snijder, 2022). On the other hand, a study by Flowerdew and Li investigated the publication choices of Chinese HSS scholars and found a link between Spanish language publications and regional subjects, and English language articles and more global issues (Snijder, 2022).

The dominance of English as a lingua franca is also examined in the context of education. This aspect highlights the sociolinguistic problems posed by the hegemony of English language in higher

education (Ntombela, 2023). Also, the global push toward English as a lingua franca denied the education in children's native languages and the inequalities that persist in education systems impacted by neoliberal, colonial, and global discourses (Dorner & Cervantes-Soon, 2020).

Overall, this scenario demonstrates a variety of opinions on English's supremacy as global language. While some scholars dispute the use of specific terminology and emphasize the friction between English and local languages, others note the potential and problems that the language presents. English dominance is debated in a variety of contexts, including professional communication, language policies, and education.

2.2 Underlying Reasons Behind Student Disengagement in English Speaking Activities

In an educational context, disengagement for second language learners can occur when they lack motivation or interest in learning English, become distracted or overwhelmed by the learning process, or experience a sense of futility or helplessness in their ability to improve their language skills. Communicating in a second language, in particular, is an active and productive set of skills that can only be developed by practice and experience (Jie et al., 2023).

Second language learners, especially in the context of Malaysia being a non-native English country with several first languages and dialects practiced among its people, may have the tendency to believe that it is pointless to be highly equipped with the skills to converse fluently in English. To many of them, it is adequate to have a basic understanding of the language as to be intelligible enough to communicate in English if they ever had to. This means in situations which demand them to write in English and most formidable to speak in English, they would most likely be able to get through, without the need to better themselves as far as motivation is concerned. Ramlie et al. (2023) stressed in his recent study that learning process which is not aligned with technological advancement would result in learners feeling bored and unmotivated to pursue learning in schools and the higher educational institutions.

Disengagement can manifest in a variety of ways for second language learners. For example, they may be less likely to participate in class discussions, avoid speaking or writing in English, or simply disengage mentally from the learning process. This can result in lower levels of language proficiency, reduced engagement in class, and a lack of confidence in their ability to communicate effectively in English. Not only that, more and more cases of low attendance during lectures were reported by lecturers. Educators should weigh in the factor of Malaysian university students lacking interest in English language subjects as they have been taking the subjects since kindergarten yet still the level of fluency is very low. Students feel discouraged by this. They are now less dependent on lecturers for knowledge and information, therefore they must strive to revolutionize teaching, with regards to technology adoption, to spark students' interest (Tagie, et al., 2023).

There are many factors that can contribute to disengagement for second language learners. These can include a lack of interest in the subject matter, cultural and linguistic barriers, inadequate language support, or negative learning experiences in the past. Addressing these factors through effective teaching strategies, targeted support, and creating a positive and inclusive learning environment can help to promote student engagement and improve language learning outcomes.

2.3 Second Language Anxiety Undermines Learners' Willingness to Speak

Second language anxiety (SLA) is a term derived from the foreign language anxiety (FLA) theory by (Horwitz et al., 1986). Foreign language anxiety, also known as xenoglossophobia, is the feeling of unease, worry, nervousness and apprehension experienced in learning or using a second or foreign

language (Koshy, 2020). According to Perez-Firmat (2003), linguists distinguish between second language (SL), which occurs when the target language is also the majority language (for example, a Spanish speaker learning English in Australia), and foreign language (FL), which occurs when the target language is different from the local tongue.

As a result of this categorization, anxiety is examined as Second Language Anxiety (SLA) or Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA), depending on the setting in which the anxiety is experienced. These terms are being used interchangeably by language researchers, although it is more commonly addressed as FLA. It is worth noting that the concepts within the subject are related, and the use of such terms are done accordingly. However, FLA is typically used to describe anxiety experienced in a language learning context where the language being studied is not widely spoken in the learner's community, while SLA is used to describe anxiety experienced in a language learning context where the language being studied is more widely used. It is more of the adaptation into the context it is used – hence the term second language anxiety is used throughout in this study to fit in the Malaysian context as it regards English as a second language.

Second Language Anxiety (SLA) refers to the feelings of stress, tension, and apprehension that individuals experience when learning or using a second language. SLA is a common phenomenon that affects language learners at various proficiency levels, regardless of their age, gender, or cultural background. This type of anxiety can arise from a variety of sources, such as fear of making mistakes, social pressure to speak correctly, or frustration with slow progress. While some degree of anxiety is normal in any learning process, excessive levels of SLA can hinder language acquisition and reduce learners' motivation and self-esteem. As such, understanding the causes and effects of SLA is crucial for language educators and learners alike, as it can help them to develop strategies to manage and overcome this common challenge.

One of the main causes of the anxiety was the difference between people's expectations and their actual performance in which when they are speaking their own native language, people frequently believe that they are completely capable and when they talk in a different language, their performance might not be strong enough for people to fully comprehend or accept them (Horwitz, 2001; as cited in Lyu, 2019). It is further explained that the main cause of anxiety, which affects students' future performance and second language proficiency, is this psychological divide which is usually shown as grades.

Moreover, learners who fear criticism or misinterpretation because of their accent, low vocabulary, or grammatical faults sometimes experience public speaking anxiety as speaking in front of a real person may cause unfavourable feelings, such as anxiousness (Gruber & Kaplan-Rakowski, 2022). Also, when the students are exposed to the threatening situations which comes from public speaking, the anxiety will exist and it can be seen through the anxiety symptoms (Khairani, 2019). It is further added that the anxiety symptoms can be seen from two conditions which are the psychological condition which consist of being confused, unable to concentrate and being tensed and experiencing physiological condition which consist of sweating, nauseous, difficulties in sleeping and having a fast heart beat (Bucklew, 1980; as cited in Khairani, 2019).

2.4 Gamifying Lessons as An Approach to Tackle Second Language Anxiety

Gamification, as described by Deterding et al. (as cited in Franklin & Jacobs, 2020), is the process of applying concepts from video games and other game-based formats to the contexts outside of the gaming industry. It is further added that when the teachers include gamification in the classroom, which is utilized to motivate and engage with the students more, has helped the students enjoy the learning and not just that, gamification has also been used in a variety of educational settings for other several reasons as well such as to engage the students with the subject, increase their enthusiasm to study, and enhance their comprehension and remember of it.

Since it is also crucial to get the students to feel more interested and aware of the learning's goals during the initial phase of the speaking lesson, gamification apps can be seen and used to excite the students' interests or attention as well (Thuy & Hung, 2021). It is further explained that both students and teachers can use PCs, laptops, tablets, or cellphones to access the apps and use them during the learning and teaching sessions. However, gamification performs better in smaller classrooms with elementary and high school students than they do with university students who must complete course work while attending lectures in order to meet specific learning objectives (Licorish et al., 2018). In addition, the existence of technology marks a turning point in how people interact with computers because it enables users to feel "presence," which fundamentally shifts the students' experience from "perceiving information" to "being in the place of information." (Gramaglia, 2013; as cited in Caponnetto et al., 2021).

According to Gruber and Kaplan-Rakowski (2022) in comparison to face-to-face interactions, speech anxiety may be lessened, possibly as a result of technology-created familiar environment in which they have proven in an article entitled '*The Impact of High-Immersion Virtual Reality on Foreign Language Anxiety When Speaking in Public*'. In the research, the researcher further elaborated that virtual reality (VR) has the ability to simulate real-life situations, making it possible to practice public speaking in a secure and natural setting, according to prior research. Hence, this study offers evidence in favour of the usefulness of VR technology for learning public speaking in a foreign language especially in lessening the speech anxiety.

Study by Abadi et al. (2022) showed that the participants' anxiety over public speaking significantly decreased when the gamification was included in the class. The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between public speaking proficiency and public speaking anxiety. The findings showed that the study's participants experienced a significant decrease in anxiety and an increase in competency due to the gamification strategy.

Similar to what Jie et al. (2023) has found, when gamification is used, the students were more active and engaged in the speaking session. This study addressed the significance of being able to communicate in English, the barriers that prevent secondary students from actively participating in English speaking sessions, and the use of gamification to encourage involvement among upper secondary students. Based on the results, it showed that students also gave excellent feedback on how gamification has facilitated their learning and they also gave favourable feedback on how gamification increased their level of engagement during the speaking lesson. From this study, it showed that making use of gamification in English speaking lessons is viewed as useful in improving students' overall involvement throughout their speaking sessions.

In another interesting study, both foreign language anxiety and the ability to process information improved significantly throughout the entire course when the gamification was involved (Chen et al., 2022). This study was done to explore students' perception towards the gamification setting in reducing the speech anxiety among university students. Not only the notion of gamification, the integration of new technology itself has been proven to help the students lessen their speech anxiety.



Figure 1 A Virtual Reality headset (Source: providecoalition.com, Copyright Consent: permissible to publish)

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

In this study, the researcher used quantitative research design by utilizing the survey which was adopted and adapted from previous research. This survey approach was chosen since a survey's goal is to make inferences of a population by examining a sample from that population (Young, 2016). It is further stated that the data they gather may be processed and examined very quickly, in contrast to spoken data, which must be recorded and transcribed before analysis.

3.2 Research Instrument

In this research, there were three sections which were Section A, Section B and Section C. In Section A, the students were asked about their gender and respective faculty. In section B, there were 15 items which needed to answer the first research question which was to examine the perception of the students towards gamification as a method to reduce speech anxiety. In section C, there were 10 items which needed to answer the second research question which was to examine the perception of the students towards apps as a method to reduce speech anxiety. For both Section B and C, the questionnaires were based on the Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA) (McCroskey, 1970) and all the items were selected and divided into section B and C.

3.3 Participants

221 students from various faculties in UiTM took part in the study and all of the participants were first- and second-year undergraduate students who enrolled in English Language courses as one of their subjects. 79 male students and 142 female students were involved in this study, ranging from the age of 18 to 23 years old.

3.4 Procedure of Data Collection

The researcher formed questionnaires by adapting and adopting the Personal Report of Public Speaking Anxiety (PRPSA) (McCroskey, 1970) using Google Form. Then, a brief link leading to the online questionnaires was provided to the students in which they were requested to complete the form and provide their own credence concerning the effectiveness of the gamification environment in lowering ESL learners' speech anxiety.

3.5 Data Analysis

The data was retrieved from the Google Form once they had completed the surveys and entered into the Statistical Program for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis. Then the analysis was done using the descriptive analysis.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Two main findings were discussed to examine the perception of gamification as a method to reduce speech anxiety and Virtual Speech application as a way to reduce speech anxiety. Below are the results.

Table 1.1 Descriptive statistics for perception towards gamification as a method to reduce speech anxiety

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Gamification	221	1.90	4.93	2.7804	.47650
Valid N (listwise)	221				

Table 1.1 represents the descriptive statistics for the perception of gamification as a method to reduce speech anxiety among the participants. The table provides information on the number of participants (N), the minimum and maximum scores, the mean score, and the standard deviation. In this study, the perception towards gamification was measured on a scale ranging from 1.90 to 4.93. The mean score for the perception of gamification as a method to reduce speech anxiety was 2.7804, with a standard deviation of 0.47650. In this case, with a mean score of 2.7804 on a scale ranging from 1.90 to 4.93, it suggests that the participants' perception towards gamification for reducing speech anxiety is relatively moderate. It indicates that they neither strongly agree nor strongly disagree with the effectiveness of gamification in alleviating speech anxiety.

Table 1.2 Descriptive statistics for perception towards gamification as a method to reduce speech anxiety by item

No	Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
1.	I have no fear of giving a speech.	2.18	1.195
2.	I look forward to giving a speech.	2.33	1.259
3.	I feel relaxed while giving a speech.	2.01	.953
4.	I enjoy preparing for a speech.	2.32	1.108
5.	I am in constant fear of forgetting what I prepared to say	3.78	1.124
6.	I get anxious if someone asks me something about my topic that I don't know.	3.81	.763
7.	I face the prospect of giving a speech with confidence.	2.31	1.007
8.	I feel that I am in complete possession of myself while giving a speech.	2.13	1.084
9.	My mind is clear when giving a speech.	2.19	1.072
10.	I do not dread giving a speech.	2.22	1.052
11.	I perspire just before starting a speech.	3.90	1.053
12.	My heart beats very fast just as I start a speech.	3.92	.971
13.	I experience considerable anxiety while sitting in the room just before my speech starts.	4.12	.928
14.	While giving a speech, I know I can control my feelings of tension and stress.	2.29	1.205
15.	I feel comfortable and relaxed in the hour or so just before giving a speech.	2.22	1.029

The data presented in Table 1.2 provides insights into the participants' perception towards gamification as a method to reduce speech anxiety. Overall, the mean scores suggest that participants generally held moderate levels of fear and anxiety towards giving speeches, but also displayed moderate levels of anticipation, relaxation, and enjoyment during speech-related activities.

It is evident that statement 13, "I experience considerable anxiety while sitting in the room just before my speech starts," obtained the highest mean value among all the statements. This indicates that the students strongly agreed with this statement compared to others. These results suggest that despite the implementation of gamification in the classroom, students still face significant difficulties in their speech fluency, which can impact their learning process.

These findings are consistent with the study conducted by Abadi et al. (2022), which demonstrated that the inclusion of gamification in the classroom significantly reduces participants' anxiety related to public speaking. However, in the present study, the results indicate that despite the presence of gamification, students continue to experience considerable amount of anxiety specifically during the pre-speech phase.

Table 2.1 Descriptive statistics for perception towards VirtualSpeech app as a method to reduce the speech anxiety

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
VirtualSpeech	221	1.00	5.00	2.5066	.82394
Valid N (listwise)	221				

Table 2.1 represents the descriptive statistics for perception towards the VirtualSpeech app as a method to reduce speech anxiety. The mean score for perception towards the VirtualSpeech app was 2.5066, indicating that, on average, participants held a moderately positive perception of the app's efficacy in reducing speech anxiety. The standard deviation of 0.82394 reflects the variability in participants' responses. A higher standard deviation suggests a wider range of perceptions, indicating that some participants had stronger beliefs about the app's effectiveness, while others held more varied opinions.

Table 2.2: Descriptive statistics for perception towards VirtualSpeech app as a method to reduce the speech anxiety by item

No	Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
1.	I believe this app can make me feel tense and nervous while preparing for giving a speech	2.26	1.158
2.	I believe this app can make me feel tense when I see the words "speech" and "public speech" on a course outline when studying	2.24	1.324
3.	I believe this app can make my thoughts become confused and jumbled when I am giving a speech	2.40	1.097
4.	I believe this app can make me have pleasant experience right after giving a speech	4.06	1.102
5.	I believe this app can make me perform poorer on speeches because I am anxious.	2.19	1.206
6.	I believe this app can make me feel anxious when the teacher announces the date of a speaking assignment.	3.14	.967
7.	I believe this app can make me have trouble falling asleep the night before a speech.	2.09	1.203
8.	I believe this app can make my heart beats very fast while I present a speech.	2.24	1.230
9.	I believe this app can make me feel anxious while waiting to give my speech.	2.13	1.337
10.	I believe this app can make me get so nervous until I forget facts I really know while giving a speech.	2.31	1.121

Table 2.2 reveals that participants held varying perceptions regarding the impact of the Virtual Speech app on their speech anxiety. For statements 1 and 2, which refer to feeling tense and nervous while preparing for a speech or encountering speech-related terms in course materials, participants had moderate beliefs, with mean scores of 2.26 and 2.24, respectively. This suggests that participants recognized the potential for the app to induce some level of tension and nervousness during speech preparation and when confronted with speech-related materials. Statements 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 reflect participants' beliefs about how the app might affect their thoughts, performance, and physiological reactions during different stages of speech delivery. The mean scores for these statements ranged from 2.13 to 2.40, indicating moderate perceptions. These results suggest that participants had mixed beliefs regarding the app's potential influence on factors such as confusion of thoughts, performance anxiety, sleep troubles, and physiological responses during speeches.

It is evident that statement 4, which states "I believe this app can make me have a pleasant experience right after giving a speech," obtained the highest mean value among all the statements. This indicates that students strongly agreed with this statement compared to others, implying that they perceived the Virtual Speech app as highly effective in providing a positive experience immediately following a speech. These results demonstrate the enthusiasm and eagerness of the students to engage with the app and actively participate in the learning process. The data suggests that the inclusion of applications or gamification techniques in the learning environment can effectively enhance students' post-speech experiences, potentially fostering a sense of accomplishment or satisfaction. These findings align with the study conducted by Jie et al. (2023), which also highlighted the positive impact of gamification on student engagement and participation during speaking sessions. The use of gamification techniques was found to promote increased student activity and involvement, indicating a greater level of enthusiasm and motivation in the learning process. The consistent findings across the present study and Jie et al.'s research emphasize the value of incorporating interactive and gamified elements, such as the Virtual Speech app, to create a more engaging and rewarding learning experience. By leveraging such tools, educators can facilitate a positive post-speech experience for students, which can contribute to their overall confidence, motivation, and continued active participation in oral communication activities.

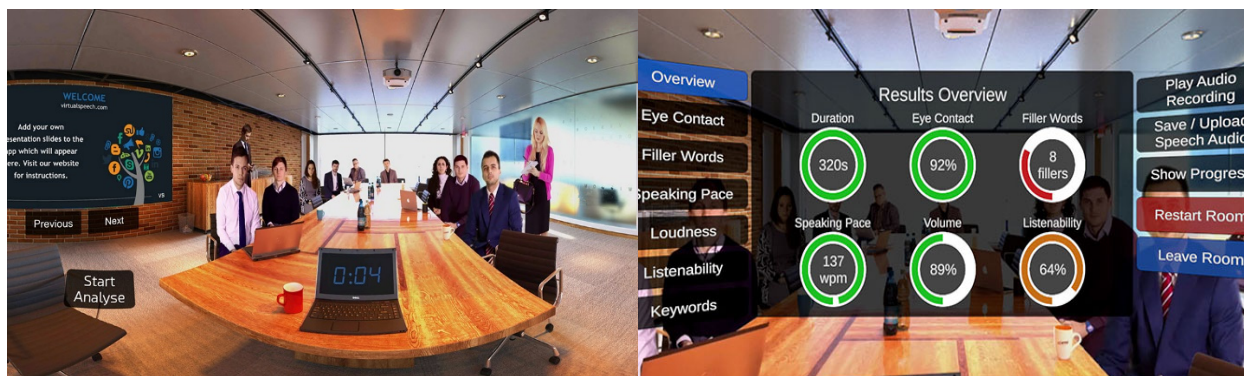


Figure 2 First-person view of VirtualSpeech speaking practice simulation using a VR headset
(Source: virtualspeech.com, Copyright Consent: permissible to publish)

5. CONCLUSION

When students experience anxiety symptoms, they are more likely to experience panic, anxiety, irritation, and fear, which can impair their ability to learn the language. Prior research, however, revealed that when gamification was incorporated into the lesson, the participants' anxiety about public speaking significantly decreased. As a result, the primary goal of this study was to investigate how students perceived themselves in relation to the gamification environment as a means of reducing speech anxiety in UiTM students. According to the findings, despite using the gamification environment, most students believe they will still experience anxiety in the beginning. However, they

believe that the VirtualSpeech application will help them improve their speaking skills. As they get more familiar with the app, i.e. the virtual surroundings and the user interface, they become more comfortable with the app, the VR device and also the virtual and real environment. Thus, students perceived that they can gain more confidence in speaking when using VirtualSpeech, and therefore assumed that by constantly engaging in more virtual public speaking practice through this virtual reality app, it will lower their anxiety when speaking in front of an audience.

The following are some implications of the study on students' perspectives of speech anxiety treatment using gaming for second language learners which are to address a frequent issue and to promote digital skills as well. First and foremost, for second language learners, speech anxiety can slow their progress and decrease their confidence, and this study can solve this issue and offer related aspects for language teachers and students by investigating the possibilities of gamification to address it. Next, gamification, which involves the use of technology and digital tools, can assist in promoting digital skills among second language learners as it can help language learners gain digital skills and improve their comfort level with utilizing technology for both learning and communication.

To conclude, while gamification and the VirtualSpeech app show promise in terms of reducing speech anxiety, it is critical to address students' pre-speech anxiety levels. Future research should concentrate on developing comprehensive interventions that reduce anxiety throughout the speech process. Educators can create a more engaging and supportive learning environment by effectively leveraging technology and interactive techniques, empowering students to overcome speech anxiety and develop effective communication skills.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed equally to this research paper.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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