Gamification, a novel pedagogical method to overcome the challenge of teaching Spanish in Chinese Universities

El reto metodológico de enseñar ELE en contextos universitarios sinohablantes: la gamificación como técnica de innovación pedagógica

在中国大学环境中关于对外西班牙语教学的方法论：作为教学创新技术的游戏化

Методологическая задача преподавания испанского языка как иностранного в условиях китайскоязычного университета: геймификация как педагогическая инновационная методика

Juan Carlos Manzanares Triquet (Lector MAEC-AECID)
Universidad de Lengua y Cultura de Pekín (China)
jcarlosmt88@hotmail.com
http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0488-6756

Abstract

A strong traditional identity pervades People´s Republic of China, the Red Dragon. Nowadays, the country still shows deep-rooted teaching values as well as other moral standards that determine the Chinese conception of the learning process. Although there has been a gradual switch from old teaching techniques to adopting a variety of modern approaches in the classroom, the abovementioned facts yet affect the roles of both students and teachers, together with the prevailing methods used during lectures, generating a situation that might appear contradictory to foreign teachers. Conversely, in the West, Gamification –a new pedagogical strategy– has proved that immersive experiences not only increase the learner's motivation, but also foster the teaching-learning process.

This article reviews the current situation of teaching Spanish as a foreign language in mainland China and explores the frameworks of the country's undergraduate degrees in Spanish Studies. This essay attempts to introduce Gamification as an effective alternative to traditional Spanish lectures in the Asian giant, supporting this belief with exiting literature and case studies that have proved to be successful to this end.

Key words: Gamification; Methodology; Spanish as a foreign language; Hispanic Philology; People´s Republic of China.

Resumen

La República Popular China, el gigante asiático, es un país con una marcada identidad tradicional que, aunque en paulatino cambio, aún presenta un estrecho arraigo con los valores del pasado, la enseñanza magistral y una moral que condiciona, por lo tanto, su manera de concebir el aprendizaje. Esta circunstancia afecta tanto a los roles de los agentes participantes como a la metodología imperante en las aulas, lo que nos traslada a un contexto que puede resultar contradictorio para el profesorado extranjero. En un prisma contrario, en Occidente, se halla la gamificación, revulsivo pedagógico que presume elevar los niveles motivacionales del alumnado haciendo gala de una experiencia inmersiva que favorece y promueve el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje.

A lo largo de este artículo expondremos, a modo de contexto, la situación actual de la enseñanza de español en la China continental; abordaremos cómo se plantea su enseñanza en los estudios del Grado en Filología Hispánica; describiremos la metodología que pervive en las aulas y, por último, presentaremos la gamificación como alternativa pedagógica *en pos de* contrastar su posible implementación a la luz de una relación de casos de éxito.

Palabras clave: Gamificación; metodología; ELE; Filología Hispánica; República Popular China.

概要

作为亚洲巨人的中华人民共和国有着传统身份的烙印。尽管这个国家正在逐渐变化，但其学生的学习方式仍然与过去的价值观，传统教学方法及道德准则有着紧密联系。这种情况既影响教学过程的参与者，也影响课堂上采用的教学方法。对外教来说，这可能会使我们处于一个矛盾的境地。在西方，游戏化作为教学诱导方式，被认为可以提高学生的学习动机水平，通过一种沉浸式的体验促进教学过程。

在本文中我们将介绍中国大陆西班牙语教学的现状；阐述西班牙语言学本科学位的教学计划；描述在课堂上使用的教学方法，最后介绍游戏化教学作为一种传统教学替代方法，并根据一系列成功案例来说明实施该方法的可行性。

关键词: 游戏化教学; 方法; 对外西班牙语教学; 西班牙语语言学; 中华人民共和国。

Аннотация

Китайская Народная Республика, азиатский гигант, - это страна с ярко выраженной традиционной самобытностью, которая, хотя и постепенно меняется, все же глубоко укоренилась в ценностях прошлого, в мастерском обучении и в нравственности, которая, таким образом, обуславливает ее образ мыслей по отношению к учебе. Это обстоятельство влияет как на роль участвующих актеров, так и на преобладающую в классе методологию, что подводит нас к контексту, который может быть противоречивым для иностранных учителей. С другой стороны, на Западе мы находим геймификацию, педагогическое отторжение, которое претендует на то, чтобы поднять мотивационный уровень учеников, предоставляя им иммерсивный опыт, который благоприятствует и способствует процессу преподавания-обучения.

В этой статье мы представим в виде контекста текущую ситуацию с преподаванием испанского языка в материковом Китае; расскажем о том, как он преподается в рамках обучения на степень магистра латиноамериканской филологии; опишем методологию, которая сохраняется в классе, и, наконец, представим геймификацию как педагогическую альтернативу, чтобы противопоставить ее возможному применению в свете списка успешных примеров.

Ключевые слова: Гамификация; методология; Испанский язык и литература; Китайская Народная Республика.

Practical realities of the Spanish courses of Bachelor's Degrees in Hispanic Philology in mainland China: global situation

The courses that make up the curriculum of the Bachelor's Degree in Hispanic Philology are mainly taught by native Spanish-speaking lecturers – of which there is a much lower number compared to their local colleagues. There is an unwritten preference for Peninsular Spanish given that as stated by Chen (2017) nearly 70% of foreign lecturers come from Spain. The above author also affirms that this preference is reflected in both the destinations chosen to pursue postgraduate studies and secondly the choice of teaching materials published outside China. However, Latin American countries are gradually catching up in this sense due to their increasingly closer relations with China.

This a priori 'superficial' division between the profiles of these two groups of teaching staff tends to create a barrier between their two ways of approaching learning and the methodologies each of them adopt in class. The same occurs with the materials assigned to each group. The University Census for Spanish as a Foreign Language carried out in Chongqing in 2011 and cited by Alcaraz and Lanau (2012) is revealing in this sense. Two common features stand out in particular in the majority of these universities. Firstly, Spanish grammar is taught by Chinese teachers. Intensive Reading, a course focusing on acquiring Spanish reading skills, is the most important and has the highest number of credits in the total curriculum. During these courses, the vast majority opt to use Chinese as the teaching language and the use of Spanish is relegated to a secondary role, practically only to address matters relating to the content. The teaching is in accordance with the so-called eclectic approach described by Sánchez

(2008), consisting of the juxtaposition of two traditional methodological approaches: the grammar-translation method and the audio-lingual method.

This structural methodology has originated due to various reasons:

1. During their training, most of the lecturers learned Spanish based on these same methodological principles. They do not question their validity and therefore nor do the students. Sometimes they are unaware of alternatives.[1]

2. Loyalty to *Español Moderno,* the standard teaching materials and model backed by the most important and respected Chinese Hispanists of the 20th and 21st century (Dong Yansheng, Lu Jingsheng and Liu Jian).

3. The role of memorisation when learning their mother tongue confers added value to similar learning strategies when learning new languages.

4. Exams as the ultimate purpose and learning as a secondary concern. This situation has its origins in Chinese history, for it was here that the use of examinations arose as an evaluation system. During the Spring and Autumn period (600-900 BC) an examination system was devised as a means of selecting civil servants (Song, 2015). This system was used for centuries, assuming major importance during the imperial era and right through until 1905 (Sánchez, 2008). This heavy emphasis on exams favours what Suen (2005) referred to as the "baton effect", involving learning focusing on instruction and selective training in the skills and content that may be evaluated in formal examinations. The result of this effect is the unequal attention given to certain aspects of the language, particularly those more related to communication. This fact is corroborated, for example, by He (2008): "Given that language teaching in this country does not have as its main objective the development of students' communicative skills, there is no motivation for lecturers or students to establish a dynamic interaction" (p. 14).

The structure of the national EEE-4 exam[2] shows which tasks are evaluated:

Table 1

Structure of the EEE-4 Exam

Part I	Grammar and vocabulary Reading comprehension Translation	Exam 2015, 8 tasks, 80 points Exam 2016, 5 tasks, 70 points
Part II	Listening comprehension Dictation	Exam 2015, 2 tasks, 20 points Exam 2016, 2 tasks, 30 points

Note. Retrieved from "Exámenes de certificación: comparación entre EEE-4, DELE B2 y SIELE," by De la Fuente & Wei, 2017, *SinoELE, 16*, p.71.

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1 The arrival of new generations is bringing about a gradual reversal of this trend. The Opening of China and the resulting economic boom, coupled with the high competition for places on master's programmes in Hispanic Studies offered in China has meant that much of the national talent emigrates to continue their studies overseas. This brings these Chinese university graduates into contact with new teaching models with a more communicative and innovative approach.
2 As explained by Vázquez and Moreno-Arrones (2017), this is the evaluation system promoted by the National Spanish Committee of the Chinese Ministry of Education. This is a compulsory exam in the second year of the Bachelor's Degree in Hispanic Philology with indefinite validity, which is used as a reference by state-owned enterprises to certify the level of students.

The gap existing between the first and second part is very significant, as is the complete absence of any test to assess speaking skills. This is the first indication of the limited importance given to communication as a tool for linguistic acquisition in this context. The exam as a whole, its different sections and the weight given to each of them constitute ample evidence that the traditional approach to learning languages continues to be applied in the Spanish courses of Chinese universities.

The second common factor across all Chinese universities is that Spanish-speaking lecturers are responsible for teaching Listening – in its different modes – and Conversation. If we consider the Hispanic Philology curriculum, it is evident that both these areas and Conversation in particular assume a residual role both in terms of presence – with teaching restricted to only the first and second years of the degree – and volume – with only two consecutive classes of 50 minutes each. The attention paid to this skill in the curriculum is minimal and on many occasions inconsistent with the practice, for various reasons:

1. The very nature of the subject is in direct conflict with the structural paradigms defining the students, who are Chinese-speaking and come from a culture that is the complete opposite to Pan-Hispanic culture.

2. The absence of reference materials recommended by the departments and programmes that may be accessed by native Spanish-speaking teachers in order to develop a teaching itinerary consistent with the objectives and content dealt with in other fields taught in parallel by Chinese teachers. The absence of such guidelines means that native Spanish-speaking teachers often feel they have no bearings and are faced with situations in which, for example, their class content overlaps with that of other colleagues in the same department.

3. The limited "value" of the subject, which is worth only one credit and, as noted above, is not even part of the EEE-4 national examination, meaning there is less extrinsic motivation compared to other subjects which have greater potential tangible benefits.

4. The facilities of the learning space, which may or may not be equipped with the minimal digital infrastructure – a projector, a computer and internet connection.[3]

5. And finally, the layout of the class, which is sometimes arranged in unmovable horizontal rows that prevent creation of a more dynamic, cooperative and flexible environment for group communication activities.

All of the above gives a general idea of the role assumed by foreign teaching staff, what is expected of them and the impact of more communicative focuses in this educational paradigm.

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3 Internet access is not total, as there are certain governmental restrictions on access to some content. This information barrier may be resolved by connecting to a VPN (Virtual Private Network) as offered by many Spanish universities and private companies in mainland China. However, the local authorities began to police these practices in 2018. For more information see the attached news clip:https://www.eldiario.es/theguardian/China-bloqueara-completamente-internet-censura_0_664233769.html

Past and present of Spanish teaching methodologies in Chinese universities

As Bega (2015) explains, according to Chinese tradition "students must listen to teachers at all times and cannot raise their voice (…)" (p. 233). In modern-day China "(…) the only thing expected from students during lectures is that they assimilate all the concepts that have been transmitted" (Bega, 2015). This attitude at least partly explains the shock commonly suffered by foreign teachers when seeking to introduce Chinese-speaking students to communicative classroom dynamics. As stated by Santos (2011): "Foreign teachers attempting to apply other methodologies to foster greater communication have noted the great difficulty Chinese students have adapting to them," (p. 65) given that possibly "at no stage during their student years have they ever spoken in class." Galloso (2014) also confirms the continued prevalence of this strong tradition in the university lectures of the Bachelor's Degree in Hispanic Philology in mainland China. In particular, he emphasises the way knowledge transfer is managed and the two pillars upon which the learning process is based: lexis and grammar. He also highlights the imbalance between the level of competence of the students – especially at initial levels – and the demands imposed by lecturers, who introduce highly complex phrases and lists of words that do not always meet a specific and/or practical need: "a large amount of information is offered, although not all the students understand it and so they 'resign' themselves to memorising it" (p. 119). Finally, he describes the habitual approach adopted in lectures, which is drawn directly from traditional methodology:

> Generally, the lecturer outlines and analyses the content in class based on the following structure: firstly, the previous content is reviewed; before the lecture, the student must go over the materials the lecturer will explain; the lecturer then presents the new content in class. During the explanation, the student takes many notes and if there are any questions they may ask them. However, in China students are so timid and their respect for the lecturer is so great that they do not dare ask any questions; this is another reason for the lack of interaction in class. (Galloso, 2014, p.119)

Alcaraz and Lanau (2012), taking as their starting point the gulf existing between Chinese and native Spanish lecturers in their field of work, prepared questionnaires to obtain an inside view of students' impressions regarding the attitudes – and aptitudes – of the teaching staff, the classroom dynamics, the resources used and the above-mentioned methodological contrast. The questionnaires highlighted both positive and negative aspects for the two groups:

Table 2

Differences between Chinese and foreign Spanish-speaking lecturers

Chinese teachers	Foreign Spanish-speaking teachers
More attention to grammar	More attention to speaking and communicating
More strict/demanding/conservative	Less strict, more relaxed
More homework	Less homework

Chinese teachers	Foreign Spanish-speaking teachers
Doubts are clarified without knowing if it is correct	At times they do not manage to resolve doubts
The lecturer is always the lecturer	The lecturer is more than a lecturer, they can even become a friend
More attention to lexis	The vocabulary learned is more adequate for daily use
More Chinese is spoken in class	Improved level of spoken Spanish
Boring	More lively/fun/interesting/open
No opportunities to speak or improvise	Classes are given in a more reflexive, open and novel way with opportunities to speak and improvise
The most important thing is the grades	More attention is paid to the classroom ambience / the process / the use of the language
The classes are boring due to the subject matter (grammar)	No attention is paid to grammar
They make us listen	They make us participate
Homework that does not require creativity	Homework that requires creativity
Limited material	Wide range of materials
Less interactive	More interactive

Note. Adapted from "Especulaciones y realidad del profesor nativo de E/LE para sinófonos en contexto," by C. Alcaraz & A. Lanau, 2012, pp. 51-63

While the sample obtained from the questionnaires only gives us a relative and approximate idea of the global reality, there are obvious differences between each of the different teaching profiles. On the one hand, Chinese lecturers are characterised by a rigid attitude and a classical role strongly focused on the importance of grammar and management of the students' learning process. On the other hand, Spanish-speaking teachers are more dynamic, creative and interactive, although to a certain extent they have greater limitations when it comes to grammar, whether due to a lack of knowledge or inadequate interpretation of the communicative focus.

As regards local lecturers, Lu (2015) points out that: "Due to their experience of learning Spanish, they are familiar with the common and different aspects of the two languages and the two cultures and accordingly they know the difficulties the students have and how to deal with them" (p. 76). Precisely the fact that they themselves have suffered the same problems when studying the language and share the same background makes them better placed to help students overcome the obstacles and provide them with effective tools. However, Professor Lu is aware that this process cannot culminate fully without the collaboration of native Spanish-speaking teachers, which he highlights have a better grasp of the cultural and linguistic knowledge in a wider sense. He also describes the ideal prototype for Spanish teachers in Chinese-speaking contexts, insisting on the need to be familiar with the Chinese language and the cultural and ethical values of their society. Accordingly, despite the differences we can find between Chinese and Spanish-speaking teachers, he reiterates the need to com-

bine the work of both to fully exploit the virtues and skills they can contribute in the teaching-learning process.

Practical implications of the Chinese learning culture

As stated by Kissinger (2011): "…China owed its millennial survival far less to the punishments meted out by its Emperors than to the community of values fostered among its population and its government of scholar-officials" (p. 33).

In order to understand the functioning of the current education system in China and how its teachers have forged an identity based on certain hallmarks traditionally linked to its millennial history, we must inevitably look to the past and more specifically to Confucianism.

According to Confucian philosophy, the social order is grounded on moral rules with two main focuses: respect for hierarchy and prevalence of the common good over individual good (Song, 2015). As Kissinger (2011) states, his philosophy "sought the redemption of the state through righteous individual behaviour" (p. 35).

Another aspect worth mentioning is the role played by learning in the Confucian moral model. Confucius sought to bring about change to achieve a society governed by harmony. Among his countless quotes, he offered the following vision of the role of learning as an instrument which is cited by Kissinger (2011):

> Love of kindness, without a love to learn, finds itself obscured by foolishness. Love of knowledge, without a love to learn, finds itself obscured by loose speculation. Love of honesty, without a love to learn, finds itself obscured by harmful candour. Love of straightforwardness, without a love to learn, finds itself obscured by misdirected judgment. Love of daring, without a love to learn, finds itself obscured by insubordination. And love for strength of character, without a love to learn, finds itself obscured by intractability. (p. 35)

We can therefore conclude that learning and cultivation of interior moral strength form an inseparable entity leading to individual and collective social equilibrium.

Having established that Confucianism constitutes the underlying ethical-moral basis of the Chinese paradigm, another equally important consideration arises which is interrelated with the influence of Confucian thought on the learning process: the *Chinese culture of learning*. According to Cortazzi and Jin (1996, cited by Sánchez, 2008), this hallmark "(…) describes the expectations, values, beliefs, preferences, perspectives and behaviour of Chinese society in relation to teaching and learning" (p. 56). A philosophy may be discerned regarding what education should be and how the agents of educational institutions should proceed. Teachers are expected to have a high level of knowledge in their field and resolve students' doubts while at the same time acting as a moral guide. This latter aspect reflects the Confucian dualism of the teacher-father figure (Vázquez, 2018) in accordance with the paternalistic role conferred on teachers as moral guides since ancient times.

Sánchez (2008) carries out a detailed analysis of the general perception of Chinese-speaking students in the West, with equal input by both teachers and researchers. We will outline the essence of this literature to offer a holistic vision of what has been said up until now and also to provide an initial context which we stress may be

perceived as stereotyped. Ballard (1989) characterises Chinese learners as hard-working, passive in the classroom, submissive to the authority of the teacher and reluctant to express their opinions. The author sees them as strictly reproductive learners without any capacity for critical and/or analytical thinking. Lee (1996) discusses the importance of effort in the learning process, explaining how it is closely linked with the concept of filial duty and is necessary to contribute towards a person's moral development in order to achieve perfection. This description clearly reflects Confucian ethics and accordingly confirms the importance of these same principles in the classroom. As regards the ideal approach to learning languages, Brick (1991), cited by Griñán (2008) states: "Learners must first master the basics and only when this is accomplished are they in a position to use what they have mastered in a creative manner" (p. 58). This methodological approach with a traditional slant is in line with Lu (2015): "It is necessary to do many structural exercises with a large dose of morphosyntactic analysis. We appreciate the value of the communicative method, but its application must be moderate" (p. 73). This idea reinforces what was previously stated by Rao (1996) "(...) Chinese tend to associate games and communicative activities in class with entertainment exclusively and are skeptical of their use as learning tools" (p. 467). These words reflect the preponderance and validity of more traditional methodologies for Spanish teaching in modern-day China, characterised by a certain reluctance to try alternative approaches – let alone novel ones – such as, for example the communicative focus which arose in the 1970s and games in their more traditional sense.

As regards the learning strategies preferred by teachers in China, this question may be answered following a brief reflection on the nature of the mother tongue of Chinese-speaking students. The Spanish language and the Chinese language are worlds apart. In terms of lexis, as argued by Lu (2015), "the similarity (...) is practically non-existent due to the fact the writing is basically pictographic and ideographic" (p. 67). As pointed out by Bega (2015) Mandarin Chinese is composed of thousands of characters and its mastery requires constant use of memorisation as there are no rules to resort to. The nature of the source language may therefore justify the importance given to memory as one of the key learning strategies for these students. Instead of viewing memorisation as a barrier preventing creativity, Biggs (1999) assessed its potential as a strategic asset to achieve better knowledge of the meaning and not mere static repetition of the reality of its concepts.

 Meanwhile, Hu (2002) describes the type of attitude adopted in relation to the group. According to this author, there is a collective orientation that discourages individuality, emphasising preservation of a harmonious atmosphere and avoidance of debate and/or criticism which could disturb the equilibrium of the group. He (2008), adopts a similar line, justifying and linking these classroom roles to the mark left on society by both Confucianism and Taoism. He explains it in this manner:

> Neither Confucianism nor Taoism offer people the possibility of enjoying complete freedom, not even the right to search for their personality, pursue their interests, achieve their ambitions, etc. Accordingly, it is not a virtue to stand out from common people and express your personal ideas without scruples, while it is a virtue to remain anonymous. (p. 12)

Due to the above, Chinese-speaking students are seen as passive, collectivist agents committed to sacrificing themselves to learning based on memorisation motivated by the achievement of goals to pay homage to their family. However, as commented by Sánchez (2008) not everyone agrees with this assessment, possibly reflecting its

divergence from reality. This disagreement regarding its interpretation could be due to failure to take into account changes in modern Chinese society. These new generations are evolving in parallel with the changes shaping the entire society, bringing a breath of fresh air and opening the door for the new teaching strategies which have spearheaded Spanish language teaching during this century. The question therefore needs to be asked whether emerging techniques such as gamification may be accepted in this particular context, given that these pedagogical approaches entail a revolution that questions the attitudes and moral and methodological foundations of their students.

From tradition to gamification: the dilemma posed by two ways of approaching learning

The theoretical-practical fundamentals of traditional Chinese teaching as outlined above collide head-on in the case of Spanish teaching with the methodological principles that comprise the essence of teaching-learning of modern European languages. Both the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFRL) and the Instituto Cervantes Curricular Plan (PCIC) adopt an action-oriented approach to language learning, where the interlocutors are active agents in the communication process. This communicative approach, together with a task-based focus, triggered a redefinition of the roles of educators towards *learning to be* that can pose a difficulty for Chinese-speaking students, particularly in the early phases of exposure.

The methodological rift between the implementation of communicative dynamics with Chinese-speaking students and the viability of their application has been widely studied (Sánchez, 2008; Cortés, 2010, Blanco, 2011). However, two aspects should be highlighted: on the one hand, the absence of recent studies that could confirm the opening up of China's educational society as a result of recent changes; and secondly, the wealth of new and innovative pedagogical models in the West which propose incorporation of new elements to make the learning experience more effective for teaching of Spanish as a foreign language and other areas, extending even beyond the educational sphere. These emerging trends such as the flipped classroom and the benefits of game-based learning and gamification, among other methods, provide answers and at the same time pose vital new questions relating to learning and research.

One of the tools that have proliferated the most in recent years is gamification. Contrary to what its name may suggest, gamification does not necessarily involve bringing games into the classroom but rather goes far beyond that. Gamification uses the characteristic features of games - whatever their nature - to provide a stimulus for students that is comparable to what we experience when we play games for fun. In other words, it seeks to reproduce the sensation that incites us to play a game voluntarily, disguising the content in order to maximise student involvement while at the same time working on classroom skills.

Although games have been and continue to be present in other educational stages such as pre-school and primary education, gamification is a particularly novel innovation at higher levels such as university education, as we will see below. Although it is yet to be included in the *Dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy (DRAE)*, the Spanish academic world is fully aware of the impact of this new pedagogical tool, as is demonstrated by the increasing number of studies being made of this practice. Taking Google Scholar as a reference, in 2008 there were only two entries relating to the

Spanish term *gamificación.* In 2014, this figure increased to 617 and by 2019 it had reached a total of 5,280 results. Importantly, the above figures solely include studies in the Hispanic world. If we consider the scientific literature in English, the search turns up 25,300 papers on gamification. However, that is not the only name given to this process. Fundéu adopts a more conservative line and suggests an alternative more in keeping with the Spanish linguistic system: *ludificación.* [4] This Hispanicised term is five times less frequent than '*gamificación*' in the current literature, with 1,220 search results in 2019. Regardless of the preferred terminology, these global figures reflect the enormous interest in gamification, whether for education in general or other spheres where it has been successfully applied, such as the business world, publicity, health care, etc.

Origin and definition of the term

According to Contreras and Eguia (2016), the use and documentation of gamification dates back to 2008.[5] As for its definition, a review of the literature offers a range of options, many of which coincide, focusing on the idea that gamification consists of "the use of game design elements in non-game contexts" (Deterding, Sicart, Nacke, O´Hara & Dixon (2011), Werbach (2014)). Kapp (2012) offers a wider perspective, proposing that the strategy should be understood as "using game-based mechanics, aesthetics and game thinking to engage people, motivate action, promote learning, and solve problems" (p. 10). As can be seen, as well as introducing the idea of game-related structural elements, his definition also clearly indicates the advantages of gamification in terms of the modification of the participants' behaviour. This idea of motivating and involving students-players in the definition of this concept is almost universally accepted by authors and researchers in the field, such as Marczeweski (2013), who explains that gamification allows us to "influence behaviour, improve motivation and foster involvement in the task" (p. 4).

In Spain, detailed studies can be found which expand and qualify the scope and possibilities offered by the inclusion of gamification in education. One of the most complete proposals is offered by Marín and Hierro (2013), who define this concept as follows:

> Gamification is a technique, a method and a strategy all at once. Based on knowledge of the elements that make games attractive, it identifies a specific task or message within an activity in a NON-game environment, the aspects of which are capable of being converted into games or game dynamics. All of this is carried out in order to achieve a special link with users, promote changes in their behaviour or transmit a message or content. In other words, it creates a significant and motivating experience. (p. 15)

Teixes (2015) defines gamification as follows: "application of game-related resources such as the design, dynamics or elements of games in non-game contexts with the aim of modifying the behaviour of individuals, motivating them to achieve specific goals" (p. 18).

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4 Tourón (2015), who prefers the term *gamificación*, highlights the existence of other possibilities such as *juguetización* in the prologue to the book *Gamificación: Cómo motivar a tu alumnado y mejorar el clima en el aula* (Rodríguez & Santiago, 2015).
5 However, the term originally arose in 2003 when Nick Pelling drafted a consultancy report for a computer company.

Analysis of the gamification proposal

As we have just seen, there are a number of recurring aspects in these different definitions of gamification. We will now consider each of the most important aspects individually to reach as concise a definition possible.

a. Inclusion of game elements: due to the infinite benefits offered by the action of playing. What is the reason behind this? Marín (2018) explains this idea as follows: "... playing is a free and spontaneous action and one of the most important sources of progress and learning throughout our lives. It is an inexhaustible source of pleasure and satisfaction" (p. 38). This affirmation highlights a key factor: the emotions underlying its practice. Although their manifestation may vary greatly from one individual to another, they are easily recognisable by all: the adrenalin of savouring a victory, the agony of defeat, the satisfaction of overcoming challenges, the desire to achieve certain recognition, etc. As González (2016) explains:

> (…) all these feelings have a physiological explanation … generated by the secretion of dopamine, which has many functions in the brain, including important roles relating to behaviour and cognition, locomotion, motivation and compensation, sleep, humour, attention span and learning. (p. 6)

The combination of sensations we experience when forming part of a game is essentially the driving force governing our behaviour in relation to a certain activity. Therefore, that is one of its potential applications. However, it is not the only one. González affirms that games have numerous other strengths, which are summarised below:

- They enhance the independence of learners.
- They grant players-students certain decision-making power when carrying out tasks assigned.
- Frequent feedback.
- Assumption of failure as part of the learning process.
- Games are, generally speaking, fun.
- Because they actively involve students, the learning process is much more significant than in more traditional classes.
- They foster both competition and cooperation between the participants.
- They are highly motivating.

b. In non-game contexts: while this may be subject to qualification, if we take into account that the presence of games may be more or less frequent at certain educational levels as a classroom strategy, schools are still a space where the presence of these practices does not represent the actual purpose of the institution.

c. In order to promote a change in student behaviour: it is well-known among the teaching community that one of the major problems of the new generation of students is the lack of attention. The uninterrupted use of mobile devices as a permanent 'window' to unlimited entertainment increases the level of indiscipline of many students, who frequently ignore the proceedings in the classroom.

The use of gamification as an interventional tool could correct or at least mitigate the negative effects of their attitude in class.

d. Improved motivation: Generally speaking, motivation refers to the willingness, the desire and also the enthusiasm necessary to carry out certain actions that involve an effort we are not always prepared to make, at times due to the inverse relationship between costs and benefits. In the classroom, as in life, we are motivated by impulses and we feel attracted to a greater or lesser extent by interests and knowledge in response to individual subjective needs.

This requires us to investigate the educational needs, preferences and characteristics of our students. This is a vital question, given that otherwise it is highly likely that we will be incapable of adequately designing a gamification system that is best suited to our context. Reeve (1994), cited by Crivillés (2017) highlights the importance of focusing on the source of the motivation and allowing the individual to achieve the necessary satisfaction of their desire. It is also essential to address the two main types of motivation regulating human behaviour: extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation arises in a manner which is external and independent to the student, whether due to the environment or the action or influence of other agents. As Ospina (2006) explains: "Extrinsically motivated students see learning as a medium to achieve benefits and avoid discomforts. Consequently, it focuses the importance of learning on the results and their consequences" (p. 158). Intrinsic motivation, meanwhile, originates internally from the person performing the linguistic learning tasks. The mere act of performing these actions in itself makes the learner feel good and have a personal interest in the actions.

In order to maintain motivation over time, one of the strategies proposed by Marín (2018) is to transform the learning process into an experience where fun, emotions and experiences play an inviolable role.

Practical examples of gamification in universities

This section will outline certain practical examples of the use of gamification in different educational fields in Spain. To date, there have been no relevant experiences in China, the object of the current study. This means there is an important niche for future research to validate their validity in this context.

1. The first case involves the Bachelor's Degree in Physical Activity and Sports Science of the University of Granada (UGR); more specifically, the half-year *School Physical Education* course in the fourth year, worth 6 credits (Pérez-López, Rivera, & Trigueros, 2017). The experience, called "The Prophecy of the Chosen Ones", draws on role-play games as a vehicle to transform the classroom into an alternative learning universe. 69 students participated in this initiative. The adventure begins with the collective reading of the "Oath of the Chosen Ones", with each student publicly declaring their commitment to assume a series of values, attitudes, responsibilities, duties and difficulties.

   The adequate atmosphere and sense of immersion is achieved through a narrative whereby the students assume the roles of fictional characters belonging to four different realms, one for each section of the curricular content of the course. During the adventure, they must face collective and individual challenges, with a

scoring system broken down into attributes, experience points, life points[6] and level of competition achieved.

A very interesting element included is the "character card", which summarises the progress made by each of the participants.

The students rated the experience very highly and made comments which offer very valuable insights: "During this adventure I felt like the star of a movie. ... It's the only time where I have been given absolute freedom and I've seen myself as being responsible for what I did and for my own learning"... Every day we are surprised with something new" ... it has managed to win us all over."

As the authors say, "it is shown that the proposal facilitates a relaxed atmosphere in the classroom..." However, they highlighted the difficulty that many students had assimilating the idea that "it is possible to create knowledge without having to study principles and concepts." This methodological shock is latent in some of the evaluations by the students: "At first it was difficult, I had the feeling of not learning the pure theory of the subject". This could be attributed to unease regarding the nature of this change.

2. Our second example is the course on *General Physiotherapy Procedures* in the second year of the Bachelor's Degree in Physiotherapy of the University of San Jorge in Zaragoza (Jiménez, Lafuente, Ortiz, Bruton, & Millán, 2017). The teaching staff for this subject designed an 'escape room' experience during the last lecture to apply part of the aspects studied during the course.

Before it was carried out, it was suggested to the students that they should go over their notes. On the day of the experience a video was played to the students at the beginning of the activity to set the scene, explaining why they were locked up, how they could escape and finally a countdown with a challenge full of enigmas, riddles and practical case examples. The activity could not take longer than an hour and was carried out in small groups corresponding to the different practical groups into which the subject was divided. It is curious to note that the participants could briefly look over their notes for the subject during the activity for periods of one minute, in which case they received a penalty of five minutes which was subtracted from the countdown. Any errors committed also led to a penalty of one minute of the total time allotted.

In total, 79 students participated in the activity. Their opinions were gathered via questionnaires. The aspect that improved the most among all the students was their motivation. However, many students suffered from and admitted to a lack of prior preparation that would have allowed them to make better use of the proposal. The teaching staff identified a "need to establish motivation actions prior to the additional activities."

3. The last case is from the Polytechnic University of Valencia (San Miguel, Megías, & Serna, 2017). This experience formed part of the *Cellular and Tissue Biology* course of the first year of the Bachelor's Degree in Podology. It involved use of *Kahoot!* and was included as a one-off activity during two hours as a revision activity for the entire course. The students were unaware of its inclusion until the actual day of the activity, resulting in the added stimulus of the surprise factor.

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6 This attribute refers to the state of health of the student-player during the game time. The students begin with a total of 10 points, which they may lose due to penalties for violating the rules or losing in duels with other classmates-adversaries.

Its objectives were to "improve performance during the session", increase student participation, employ mobile phones as a distracting element and compare the results for the subject with those of the previous year, among others.

The revision class consisted of two Kahoots! The first one was of a more basic level with 10 questions, while the second one was of a medium level with 15 questions. At the end of the activity, the students completed a voluntary questionnaire expressing their opinion regarding the use of these types of tools, their satisfaction, its utility, etc. 78% of the participants said they were "very satisfied with the activity", while the remaining 22% indicated they were "satisfied". More than 80% considered that the teaching potential of this tool as a practical means of reinforcing the content learned was "excellent". 17% considered that it was "good", while the remaining 3% were indifferent.

Conclusions

Gamification stands out as one of the most effective innovative alternatives to motivate students learning Spanish as a foreign language, not to mention countless other disciplines. In general, the results of the as yet limited publications existing in this area indicate that students view its implementation positively.

The introduction of game-based elements readapts learning perspectives and also influences students' results. Apart from the novelty of the technique itself, one of its potential strengths is the underlying pedagogical philosophy, the target audience of which, it should be recalled, is none other than students of the so-called Generation Z.

Gamification is synonymous with making decisions, and lots of them. It embraces an entire process requiring a combination of objectives, content and evaluation, together with other affective, pedagogical and instrumental parameters, specific materials and ICT features. Revolutionising the classroom with a carefully designed experience-based activity incorporating game-based elements that sparks interest among students involves a considerable investment of time on the part of teaching staff. The potential of this still emerging field is enormous and many projects employing its techniques consider that it is well worth the effort required in light of the results. However, it is not infallible by any means, not necessarily because it suffers deficiencies, but because no method or focus – whether past or current – can guarantee total success.

In mainland China, however, as we have sought to highlight in the introduction to this study, various different factors come into play that place teachers of Spanish as a foreign language in a new dimension. The rapid acceptance of these new proposals in the West may not necessarily be replicated in the East, and more specifically in Chinese-speaking environments.

The innovation experiences referred to above involve introduction of revolutionary teaching tools, reversing the roles that learners assume in the classroom. This identity shift and its strong emphasis on game-based components elevates the learning experience to an unknown height which may, aside from its surprise effect, generate unease among these types of students with educational profiles and backgrounds directly opposed to our own. Students may feel that their expectations are not met, with a certain halo effect in contrast to the methodology adopted by other colleagues, or may simply not see this learning approach as a valid alternative teaching method.

Each group, each teacher, each curriculum and each learning context is different. These unique features and nuances influence our performance as teachers. As Marín (2018) states, "motivating everyone involved to make the decision to play the game is one of the major challenges of gamification and any collective game proposal" (p. 103). In addition, setbacks, whether personal (physical or psychological) or spatial (relating to resources, connectivity, etc.), can always alter preliminary forecasts and circumstances and thereby prejudice the execution of these activities, regardless of the scenario.

Naturally, gamification is not exempt from this uncertainty, especially in these early, experimental stages of its pedagogical life. As Jiménez (2014) points out, we must inevitably resort to "trial and error for these types of projects, particularly at this stage during the formation of the discipline" (p. 37). The objective for the time being must be to "introduce the minimum viable gamification to determine its results and based on this, embark on a process of evaluation and continuous improvement" (p. 37). Only time will tell how effective its application will be and whether Chinese-speaking university students will also adopt a more flexible position and embrace this new proposal.

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