

From Local Stories to Global English: A Qualitative Study of Pre-Service English Teachers' Experiences with AI-Assisted Gamified ELT in a Teaching English to Young Learners Course

Manolya Sağlam¹

¹ Dr., Asst. Prof., Head of
English Language Teaching
Department, Biruni University,
Faculty of Education,
Department of English
Language Teaching, Türkiye

✉ Corresponding author:

manolyas@biruni.edu.tr



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ABSTRACT: This qualitative study explores pre-service English teachers' experiences with AI-assisted gamified English Language Teaching (ELT) practices within a Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) course. Grounded in a global pedagogical perspective, the study examines how artificial intelligence and gamification mediate teacher learning, pedagogical decision-making, and cultural meaning-making in early language education. The participants consisted of pre-service English teachers enrolled in a TEYL course at a university-level teacher education program. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and analysis of digital teaching artefacts. Thematic analysis revealed four main themes: enhanced pedagogical engagement through gamified AI tools, emerging understandings of globalized ELT practices, evolving professional identities as future TEYL teachers, and critical reflections on the affordances and challenges of AI integration. The findings suggest that AI-assisted gamification not only supports active and culturally responsive learning environments but also fosters pre-service teachers' reflective and adaptive pedagogical competencies. The study contributes to the growing literature on AI-enhanced teacher education by highlighting the importance of contextualised, experience-based learning in preparing future English teachers to work with young learners in digitally mediated classrooms.

KEYWORDS: AI-assisted gamification; Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL); pre-service English teachers; globalized ELT; digital pedagogy.

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Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has significantly reshaped educational practices, particularly in English Language Teaching (ELT), where artificial intelligence (AI) and gamification are increasingly employed to support learner engagement, personalisation, and instructional design (Deterding et al., 2011; Holmes et al., 2019). AI-driven systems offer adaptive feedback and content generation, while gamification introduces motivational elements such as narratives, challenges, and rewards, together creating new pedagogical possibilities for language education (Luckin et al., 2016).

Parallel to these technological developments, the concept of *glocalisation*—the dynamic interaction between global processes and local cultural contexts—has gained prominence in the discourse of language education (Robertson, 1995). In ELT, glocal pedagogy emphasises the need to balance the global status of English with locally meaningful cultural practices, identities, and narratives (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). This balance is particularly crucial in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL), where language learning is closely intertwined with affective engagement, imagination, and cultural familiarity (Cameron, 2001; Pinter, 2017).

Teacher education programs, therefore, face the challenge of preparing pre-service teachers who can integrate technological innovation while maintaining pedagogical sensitivity and cultural responsiveness. Research in teacher cognition highlights that teachers' beliefs, experiences, and reflective practices play a central role in shaping instructional decision-making (Borg, 2015). Although AI-assisted and gamified ELT practices have been widely discussed, existing research has predominantly focused on learner outcomes or technological efficiency rather than teachers' lived experiences, particularly in pre-service TEYL contexts (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019).

Consequently, there is a need for qualitative research that explores how pre-service English teachers experience, interpret, and negotiate AI-assisted gamified practices within teacher education courses. Understanding these experiences is essential for developing pedagogically grounded and culturally responsive models of AI integration in ELT.

Research Aim and Research Questions

This study aims to explore pre-service English teachers' experiences with AI-assisted gamified ELT practices implemented in a Teaching English to Young Learners course through a glocal pedagogical perspective.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do pre-service English teachers experience AI-assisted gamified ELT practices in a TEYL course?
2. How do they perceive the pedagogical value of AI-assisted gamification for teaching English to young learners?

3. How do pre-service teachers negotiate local cultural elements and global English teaching practices through AI-assisted gamified activities?
4. In what ways do these experiences influence their professional learning and emerging teacher identities?

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative interpretive case study design to examine participants' lived experiences within a bounded educational context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A qualitative approach was chosen to capture the complexity of meaning-making processes related to AI-assisted gamified ELT practices.

Participants and Context

Participants were pre-service English teachers enrolled in a compulsory Teaching English to Young Learners course in an undergraduate ELT program at a foundation university in Türkiye. All participants were in their third year of study and reported limited prior experience with AI-supported instructional tools.

Data Collection

Data were collected through multiple qualitative sources to ensure triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These included semi-structured individual interviews, focus group discussions, reflective journals, and analysis of digital teaching artefacts created during AI-assisted gamified lesson design tasks. Interview and journal prompts focused on pedagogical decision-making, cultural considerations, ethical reflections, and professional learning.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Coding was conducted inductively, and themes were refined through constant comparison across data sources to enhance analytical rigour.

Trustworthiness and Ethics

Trustworthiness was ensured through methodological triangulation, peer debriefing, and rich description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee, and informed consent was secured from all participants.

Research Results

AI-Assisted Gamification and Pedagogical Engagement

Participants reported heightened motivation and engagement when designing AI-assisted

gamified activities, describing the process as interactive and pedagogically meaningful. This finding aligns with gamification research emphasising the motivational affordances of game-based elements when aligned with learning objectives (Deterding et al., 2011; Kapp, 2012).

Glocal Meaning-Making in ELT

Pre-service teachers emphasised integrating local stories, cultural symbols, and familiar contexts into AI-assisted activities. These practices enabled learners to connect English learning with their lived experiences, reflecting glocal pedagogical principles (Kumaravadivelu, 2006; Canagarajah, 2013).

Emerging Professional Identity

Engagement with AI-assisted gamification contributed to participants' growing confidence and sense of preparedness as future TEYL teachers. Experiential design tasks supported the development of teacher cognition and professional identity (Borg, 2015; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009).

Critical Awareness and Ethical Positioning

While participants recognised the pedagogical benefits of AI, they also articulated concerns about ethical use, overreliance, and the need to maintain teacher control. This critical stance reflects broader calls for responsible AI integration in education (Holmes et al., 2019; Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019).

Conclusions

The findings demonstrate that AI-assisted gamified ELT practices can function as pedagogical mediators that support engagement, cultural responsiveness, and professional learning when situated within a glocal framework. Consistent with prior research, gamification enhanced engagement when pedagogically purposeful rather than superficial (Kapp, 2012), while AI supported reflective decision-making rather than automated instruction (Holmes et al., 2019).

Importantly, the integration of local cultural narratives challenges assumptions that technology-enhanced ELT promotes cultural homogenization. Instead, the study illustrates how AI-assisted gamification can support culturally grounded English teaching when teachers retain pedagogical agency (Canagarajah, 2013). These experiences also contributed to the emergence of professional identities characterised by adaptability, ethical awareness, and reflective practice (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Borg, 2015).

Limitations and Future Research

This study was limited to a single institutional context and relied on self-reported qualitative data. Future research may adopt longitudinal designs, include classroom implementation with young learners, or employ mixed-methods approaches to triangulate findings and examine learning outcomes.

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