Using Kahoot! to Gamify Learning in the Language Classroom

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Abstract
Technology is increasingly being used to foster engagement, enhance classroom dynamics, promote autonomy and improve the student learning experience in language learning environments. Many teachers have begun to employ digital apps and tools (e.g. Mentimeter and GoSoapBox) as a more interactive alternative to traditional activities. One product that has been particularly popular due to its user-friendly interface and focus on motivation, enjoyment and competition is Kahoot! (https://kahoot.com) – a game-based student response system in which the teacher takes on the role of a game show host with the students as contenders. Kahoot! can enhance the language classroom by making the introduction of new content (e.g. definitions, tenses or collocations) and the consolidation of knowledge more interactive and visible, helping learners reach mastery of the language content. Although Kahoot! has been a popular platform since its launch in 2013, its utility in the language classroom has yet to be fully explored. Furthermore, to be used effectively, teachers need a clear understanding of its subject-specific affordance and limitations. Therefore, this review explores how language teachers can use Kahoot! to improve student engagement – and potentially academic performance – by gamifying learning. Notably, only the free version of Kahoot! is examined.

Keywords
Kahoot!, English Language teaching, Engagement, Competition, Interactive, Digital apps, Gamify

Introduction
Technology is increasingly being used to foster engagement, enhance classroom dynamics, promote autonomy and improve the student learning experience in
language learning environments (Kessler, 2018). Many teachers have begun to employ digital apps and tools (e.g. Mentimeter and GoSoapBox) as a more interactive alternative to traditional activities (Kohnke, 2019; Moorhouse and Kohnke, 2020; Wang and Tahir, 2015). One product that has been particularly popular due to its user-friendly interface and focus on motivation, enjoyment and competition is Kahoot! (https://kahoot.com) – a game-based student response system (GSRS) in which the teacher takes on the role of a game show host with the students as contenders. Kahoot! can enhance the language classroom by making the introduction of new content (e.g. definitions, tenses or collocations) and the consolidation of knowledge more interactive and visible (Wang and Tahir, 2020), helping learners reach mastery of the language content. Although Kahoot! has been a popular platform since its launch in 2013, its utility in the language classroom has yet to be fully explored. Furthermore, to be used effectively, teachers need a clear understanding of its subject-specific affordance and limitations. Therefore, this review explores how language teachers can use Kahoot! to improve student engagement – and potentially academic performance – by gamifying learning. Notably, only the free version of Kahoot! is examined.

**Overview**

To use Kahoot!, a teacher must first register for a free account. They can then create an interactive quiz or select from a library of publicly available quizzes. Quizzes may include multiple-choice questions with two to four responses and prompts that include words or images. The teacher can select an appropriate response time for each question (from 5 seconds to 4 minutes), depending on difficulty or learner factors (see Figure 1). Once a quiz has been created and saved, students can be invited to play during in-person classes or remotely through an internet-enabled device, using a unique PIN. Kahoot! includes two modes of play, team versus team and player versus player, a beneficial feature allowing teachers to decide if learners would benefit from peer support. Instructors also have the option of “hosting live”, wherein all students answer the questions on their own devices simultaneously, competing for scores against their peers. Students may even be assigned to compete against themselves in “ghost mode” (see Figure 2), an excellent opportunity for learners to reinforce previous knowledge.

**Affordances and Pedagogical Benefits**

Kahoot! supports second-language acquisition through its intuitive gameplay requiring the learner to experiment, reflect and evaluate knowledge and facilitating post-game discussion about responses. This reduces cognitive overload, increasing student awareness of successes and difficulties and further promotes/informs learning strategies (Li, 2017).

We have observed learners of all ages highly engaged in a Kahoot! quiz, keen to compete against their classmates in both the speed and accuracy of their responses. The bright colours, energetic music, countdown clock and leaderboard add to the game show environment (see Figure 3). However, Kahoot!’s advantages in the language classroom extend beyond motivation. Many of the activities teachers use to
introduce, revise and assess grammar, vocabulary, phonology and functional knowledge can be adapted to the Kahoot! platform. For example, teachers can design odd-one-out, fill-in-the-gap, matching (e.g. images to words, oral to written, synonyms and antonyms), spelling and correction activities (see Figure 4). For higher-level students, Kahoot! is particularly suitable for fixed expressions (e.g. wet

Figure 1. Quiz options.
blanket, the spitting image of) and collocations (e.g. do a favour, have a good time). With low-level learners, it may be especially useful with spelling and homonyms. Kahoot! is also useful for sentence completion activities in which students must select the correct preposition or parts of speech. An additional effective strategy is to design a 10-question quiz in which students work out the language rules in the first six, followed by related questions to check their understanding. These activities focus learners’ attention on language features and encourage positive uptake (Schmidt, 1990).

Teachers can also use Kahoot! during reading and listening activities, asking students to read or listen to a portion of a text and then providing comprehension questions through the platform. However, the free version is limited to closed-response question types, such as true/false, yes/no or multiple choice. Therefore, other platforms, such as Mentimeter, may be better suited to open-ended responses and other question types (see Moorhouse and Kohnke, 2020, for a review of Mentimeter). To deepen student learning, a teacher may pause the gameplay and facilitate dialogue around questions as they are answered, with phrases such as “Why did you choose answer B?” or “Can you give any other examples?”. This is an excellent tool for evaluating class understanding of content, pinpointing learning gaps and intervening accordingly. We have found
Figure 3. Leaderboard.

Figure 4. Quiz mode.
that reusing the same quiz multiple times to consolidate learning and compare the results a good strategy, informing not only student learning but also teaching practices. Because Kahoot! has a user-friendly interface, students may be tasked with creating quizzes for their classmates to complete. Another feature relevant to the language classroom is the ability for students to engage in the target language anonymously in a fun, safe and engaging digital environment (Baron et al., 2016) without being put on the spot by teacher nominations. In addition, Kahoot! is an effective tool to use as an entry and exit ticket to ascertain previous knowledge and expectations. This form of pre-emptive formative assessment (see Carless, 2007) allows intervention before misunderstandings can lead to ineffective learning and poor results. Finally, teachers can download scores to a spreadsheet, including student answers to individual questions, allowing them to analyse strengths and weaknesses and tailor ongoing feedback accordingly.

Limitations

While Kahoot! has clear benefits for language teachers, we are also conscious of its limitations. For example, using GSRS may reduce opportunities for students to interact verbally. Therefore, teachers should consider adding communicative activities, such as role-playing or discussion, to provide oral practice. Furthermore, Kahoot!’s novelty may wear off if used too frequently (Wang and Tahir, 2020). Therefore, we suggest strategic incorporation to develop both receptive and productive language skills. Finally, the free version of Kahoot! allows only closed-response questions. A “pro” or “premium” subscription is required to access features such as polls, puzzles or short answers.

Conclusion

Kahoot! allows language teachers to create engaging learning experiences that lead to improved on-task behaviour, collaborative language learning and personalised, targeted teaching based on student responses. More information on Kahoot! and its features is available at https://kahoot.com along with thousands of ready-made freely available quizzes (e.g. Cambridge Free Kahoot! for Young Learners).

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.
References


