

GAME ELEMENTS AS A TOOL FOR LEARNER-CENTERED INSTRUCTION IN PRE-A1–A1 MULTILINGUAL CLASSROOMS

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Abstract. The paper advances a theoretical argument that game elements in beginner-level English instruction should be understood not as motivational decoration but as structural mediators of learner-centredness. Three claims are developed. First, the standard defining features of learner-centred instruction — control over pace, choice of route, visible criteria of success and legitimate use of the learner’s prior resources — are exactly the features that a Pre-A1 learner cannot negotiate verbally, since the language in which such negotiation normally occurs is the language being learnt. Second, discrete game elements can carry these functions non-verbally, and therefore make learner-centredness operable at a level at which it is usually declared but not enacted. Third, in a multilingual classroom the rule layer of any such element must operate in the learner’s home language, which converts translanguaging from a tolerated practice into a design requirement. A mapping of seven game elements onto the corresponding learner-centred functions is proposed, together with the theoretical limits of the argument.

Keywords: *game elements, learner-centred instruction, Pre-A1, A1, multilingual classroom, translanguaging, zone of proximal development, self-determination theory, CEFR, young learners.*

1. The problem: learner-centredness declared but not enacted at Pre-A1

Learner-centred instruction is defined in the literature by a shift in who holds control over the learning process. Weimer describes this as a change in the balance of power, in the function of content, in the role of the teacher, in the responsibility for learning and in the purpose of assessment [1]. Nunan and Tudor locate the same shift within language education specifically, treating the learner’s own goals, strategies and self-appraisal as the organising principle of the curriculum rather than as a supplement to it [2; 3].

All these formulations share a hidden precondition: they assume the learner can understand and act on the options offered. Choice presupposes that alternatives can be read; self-assessment presupposes that criteria can be stated; negotiation of route presupposes a shared language of negotiation. In a general-education classroom this holds, because that language is the one everybody already speaks. In a Pre-A1 or A1 English classroom it does not hold, and cannot, because the language of negotiation is the language being acquired.

This produces a specific paradox: at the level where learner-centredness would be most valuable — the beginner level, at which differences in prior exposure between children of the same age are widest — it is least available in its ordinary verbal form. In practice it is therefore declared in the syllabus and abandoned in the lesson, and the frontal, single-task format returns by default.

2. The theoretical claim: game elements as non-verbal carriers of learner-centred functions

The argument advanced here is that this paradox is not a necessary one, because the functions that constitute learner-centredness do not have to be delivered verbally. They can be delivered structurally, and game elements are the most economical structural carriers available.

The claim rests on the narrow definition of gamification given by Deterding and colleagues — the use of game design elements in non-game contexts [4] — which locates the phenomenon in discrete, separable elements rather than in whole games, so that discrete elements can be assigned discrete pedagogical functions. Sailer and colleagues showed experimentally that these elements are indeed functionally differentiated: badges, performance graphs and leaderboards act on the experience of competence, whereas avatars, meaningful stories and teammates act on social relatedness [5]. Under self-determination theory, competence, autonomy and relatedness are the three needs whose satisfaction sustains motivation [6] — and these are, in substance, what learner-centred pedagogy calls control, choice and belonging.

Two further supports should be named. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development establishes that the appropriate task is defined relative to the individual learner rather than to the class [7]; a graded element that visibly adjusts difficulty is a technical implementation of that principle. And Tomlinson treats principled adaptation as constitutive of the material rather than as an optional layer over it [8], which licenses treating the game layer as a designed pedagogical object rather than as packaging.

Table 1 sets out the proposed correspondence. Its status is analytical: it states which learner-centred function each element is capable of carrying, not how strongly it does so.

Table 1. Game elements and the learner-centred functions they can carry at Pre-A1-A1

Game element	Learner-centred function	Why it works without English	SDT need
Progress bar / level map	Awareness of one's own position and route	Position is shown spatially, not stated	Competence
Points / stars	Immediate, criterion-referenced feedback	Feedback is numerical, not verbal	Competence
Graded task cards (A/B/C)	Choice of an appropriate level of challenge	Difficulty is signalled by a symbol	Autonomy
Avatar / character choice	Ownership of one's presence in the activity	Selection needs single words only	Autonomy, relatedness
Collectible set	A goal the learner holds independently of the teacher	The set is visibly incomplete	Competence, autonomy
Team structure	Belonging and peer support	Membership is shown by grouping	Relatedness
Story frame / quest	Coherence of purpose across a sequence of tasks	Requires the home language for its rules	Relatedness

Source: developed by the author; element categories after Deterding et al. (2011) [4] and Sailer et al. (2017) [5]; needs after Deci & Ryan (2000) [6].

3. The multilingual condition: translanguaging as a design requirement

The final column of Table 1 marks the point at which the argument becomes conditional. Six of the seven elements operate without English because their meaning is carried by a number, a position, a symbol or a grouping. The seventh — the story frame, also the element with the greatest integrative power — does not: a quest must be explained before it can be entered.

This is where the multilingual composition of the classroom ceases to be a background fact and becomes a design parameter. Cummins argued that monolingual instructional strategies are indefensible in multilingual classrooms [9], and García and Wei treat the learner's full repertoire as a single resource rather than as separate compartments [10]. Applied here, these positions yield a stronger conclusion than they are usually taken to license: if the learner-centred function of an element depends on the learner grasping its rule, and if at Pre-A1 that rule cannot be grasped in English, then delivering it in the home language is not a permitted concession to circumstance but the condition under which the element performs its function at all. Translanguaging thereby moves from a tolerated classroom practice to a design requirement written into the material.

The CEFR Companion Volume supplies the criterion apparatus for stating this precisely: it introduced the Pre-A1 level and extended the descriptor scales to plurilingual competence, so that the language demanded by a mechanic can be checked against the level exactly as the language of a task is [11].

4. Limits of the argument

Three limits should be stated, since a theoretical claim is only as strong as its declared boundaries. First, the argument is one of possibility, not magnitude: it establishes that game elements can carry learner-centred functions non-verbally, not how much learning follows. The meta-analytic evidence indicates a small-to-medium effect on cognitive outcomes and smaller, less stable effects on motivation and behaviour [12] — consistent with the claim, but not a measurement of it in the population at issue.

Second, the elements are not uniformly benign. Hamari and colleagues found effects to be conditional on context and users [13], and Toda and colleagues' systematic mapping of negative effects identifies leaderboards as the most frequently implicated element and loss of performance as the most frequently reported harm [14]. A public ranking inverts the learner-centred logic — it makes the learner's position a matter of public comparison rather than of personal reference — and is therefore excluded from Table 1.

Third, the argument does not extend upward without modification: as learners acquire the language in which negotiation can occur, the structural substitution proposed here becomes progressively less necessary and the elements should recede rather than accumulate. The claim is level-specific by construction.

5. Concluding theses

1. Learner-centred instruction presupposes a language of negotiation; at Pre-A1 that presupposition fails, because the language of negotiation is the object of instruction.

2. Game elements can carry the constitutive functions of learner-centredness — position, feedback, choice, ownership, goal and belonging — through non-verbal means, and therefore make learner-centredness enactable at a level at which it is normally only declared.

3. In a multilingual classroom the rule layer of any element that is not understood non-verbally must operate in the learner's home language; translanguaging is consequently a design requirement, not a pedagogical concession.

4. Elements that convert personal reference into public comparison — leaderboards above all — contradict the learner-centred rationale and fall outside the proposed set.

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