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INTEGRATING ART THERAPY AND GAMIFICATION INTO FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING: DEVELOPING A COURSE FOR THE TOURISM SECTOR

Abstract. *This study examines the effectiveness of an integrated foreign language course for tourism students that combines art therapy and gamification. Sixty first-year students at the International University of Tourism and Hospitality in Turkestan participated, with 30 in an experimental group and 30 in a control group. Pre-tests and post-tests assessed language proficiency and cognitive skills, while questionnaires and interviews measured motivation, emotional engagement, and professional preparedness.*

Results showed that students in the experimental group improved significantly in English proficiency, creativity, motivation, and professional readiness compared to the control group. Art therapy reduced anxiety and fostered emotional engagement, while gamified activities enhanced participation and practical application of language skills in tourism scenarios.

The study demonstrates that combining creative and gamified approaches provides an effective, engaging learning environment, helping future tourism professionals develop both language and professional competencies.

Keywords: *tourism education, foreign language learning, art therapy, gamification, cognitive skills, professional preparedness*

Introduction

In the modern world, the tourism industry is developing at an extremely rapid pace, placing high demands on the training of specialists capable of effective communication in foreign languages and demonstrating creativity in professional activities [1]. Foreign language proficiency is a key skill for future tourism professionals, as their work involves intercultural interaction, serving international clients, and adapting to diverse cultural contexts [2]. Therefore, contemporary educational programs should not only focus on language competencies but also enhance students' cognitive, emotional, and creative skills. Traditional foreign language instruction, which

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emphasizes grammar, vocabulary memorization, and translation exercises, often fails to fully develop the competencies necessary for effective communication in real-world professional contexts. This limitation is particularly critical in tourism education, where students must interact with international clients, adapt to diverse cultural norms, and manage unpredictable situations [1].

To address these challenges, increasing attention is being given to innovative pedagogical approaches, such as art therapy and gamification, which simultaneously promote cognitive, emotional, and motivational development [2; 3; 4]. Art therapy has been widely recognized as an effective tool for enhancing creativity, emotional intelligence, and problem-solving abilities. Through drawing, painting, music, drama, and other artistic activities, students can express emotions, reduce anxiety, improve empathy, and develop critical thinking and analytical skills [3; 4]. In tourism education, these capabilities are essential, as professionals frequently face stressful situations, must provide personalized client service, and navigate complex intercultural interactions [2]. Research indicates that art therapy interventions in language classrooms not only increase student engagement but also foster confidence in speaking and oral communication [2]. Moreover, integrating art and scientific methodologies in educational practice supports holistic development and strengthens students' creative and analytical abilities [5]. Comparative studies of art therapy applications across different countries have shown that, despite methodological variations, art therapy consistently improves emotional regulation, creativity, and student motivation, making it a versatile approach for higher education, including tourism programs [6].

Recent innovations in art therapy include the use of multimedia and virtual reality technologies. Multimedia-based methods, such as digital drawing tools, video-based reflective tasks, and interactive visual projects, enhance both emotional expression and cognitive engagement [7]. Virtual reality environments provide immersive experiences, allowing students to simulate real-world scenarios, explore cultural contexts, and practice professional communication skills in a safe and interactive space [8]. In higher education, these approaches contribute not only to emotional well-being but also to active learning, sustained motivation, and creativity, all of which are essential for tourism students preparing for international professional settings [9].

Alongside art therapy, gamification has emerged as a complementary approach that enhances motivation, engagement, and cognitive skill development in foreign language education. By incorporating game mechanics such as points, levels, quests, badges, and leaderboards, educators can encourage students to participate actively and persistently in learning activities [1]. For tourism students, gamified learning allows the simulation of authentic professional scenarios, including conducting guided tours, resolving client complaints, negotiating services, or managing travel logistics, thereby bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application [8]. Gamification also promotes both competition and collaboration, reinforcing teamwork and interpersonal communication skills, which are crucial in the tourism sector [10].

Despite extensive research on art therapy and gamification individually, studies addressing their combined application in foreign language education for tourism students remain limited [11; 12]. Emerging research suggests that integrating creative, immersive, and interactive methods—such as virtual and augmented reality, digital storytelling, and simulation games—can simultaneously enhance emotional and cognitive development, cultural awareness, and professional competencies [11; 12]. For example, interactive digital storytelling allows students to engage with cultural narratives, practice language in context, and develop problem-solving strategies, combining the benefits of artistic expression and game-based learning [13]. This highlights a significant gap in

the literature and underscores the need to design integrated courses that foster emotional intelligence, creativity, communicative competence, and professional readiness for tourism students.

Based on the literature review, the research hypothesis of this study is proposed: the integration of art therapy and gamification elements into a foreign language course for tourism students enhances their motivation, creativity, and communicative skills, while also strengthening their professional preparation for working in an international tourism environment [14]. The relevance of this study is determined by two main factors: the growing demand for competent professionals in the tourism industry and the necessity of implementing innovative pedagogical approaches that develop students' cognitive, emotional, and professional competencies. The aim of the study is to design and pilot an English language course for tourism students based on the integrated application of art therapy practices and gamification elements.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a quasi-experimental mixed-methods design to evaluate the effectiveness of an integrated foreign language course for tourism students, combining art therapy practices and gamification elements. The design allowed for both quantitative assessment of language proficiency and cognitive development, as well as qualitative evaluation of students' emotional engagement, motivation, and creativity. This approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of the pedagogical impact of the integrated methods on students' professional preparedness.

Participants

The participants included first-year tourism students enrolled in the English language program at the International University of Tourism and Hospitality in Turkestan. A total of 60 students were selected using a purposive sampling technique, with 30 students assigned to the experimental group (receiving the integrated course) and 30 students to the control group (receiving traditional language instruction). Both groups were comparable in terms of age, prior English proficiency, and academic background. All participants provided informed consent to take part in the study.

Instruments and Materials

1. **Language Proficiency Assessment:** A pre-test and post-test measured students' English language skills in speaking, listening, reading, and writing, using standardized evaluation rubrics.
2. **Creativity and Cognitive Skills Tasks:** Activities such as problem-solving scenarios, role-plays, and reflective journals were used to assess cognitive and creative development.
3. **Art Therapy Activities:** Students engaged in drawing, digital storytelling, dramatization, and other art-based exercises designed to express emotions, reduce anxiety, and enhance creativity.
4. **Gamification Elements:** The course incorporated game mechanics, including points, levels, quests, badges, and team challenges. Simulated professional tourism scenarios were embedded in gamified tasks to replicate real-world interactions with clients and cultural situations.

5. Questionnaires and Interviews: A structured questionnaire assessed students' motivation, engagement, and emotional response, while semi-structured interviews with selected participants and instructors provided deeper insights into the learning experience.

Procedure

The study was conducted over 12 weeks, with two sessions per week. The experimental group received instruction that integrated art therapy exercises and gamified activities into the English curriculum, while the control group followed a standard language course focusing on grammar and vocabulary. The experimental sessions included:

- Warm-up creative tasks (drawing or storytelling related to tourism topics) to stimulate emotional engagement.
- Gamified activities (role-plays, quests, team challenges) simulating real tourism scenarios.
- Language-focused tasks embedded in artistic and gamified contexts to practice professional communication skills.

Data collection involved administering pre-tests and post-tests, distributing questionnaires at mid-course and end-of-course points, and conducting interviews after course completion. Observations of classroom interactions and participation levels were recorded to complement quantitative and qualitative data.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data from pre-tests, post-tests, and questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics, paired-sample t-tests, and analysis of variance (ANOVA) to determine differences between experimental and control groups. Qualitative data from interviews, journals, and observations were analyzed using thematic content analysis to identify recurring patterns related to motivation, creativity, engagement, and emotional responses. Triangulation of data sources ensured reliability and validity of the findings.

Results

1. English Language Proficiency

At the beginning of the course, during the pre-test, both groups had similar levels of English proficiency. The experimental group had an average score of 61.2 points, while the control group scored 62.1 points. This indicates that the groups were comparable at the start of the study, allowing for meaningful comparisons of post-course outcomes. Many students initially lacked confidence in speaking, particularly when simulating interactions with foreign tourists, which is a crucial skill for future tourism professionals.

After completing the course, the post-test results showed a significant improvement in the experimental group, with an average score of 85.4 points, compared to 71.8 points in the control group. These results suggest that the integrated course effectively enhanced students' communicative skills, enabling them to use English more confidently in practical contexts. Art therapy and gamification exercises provided a supportive environment where students could express themselves, reduce anxiety, and actively practice their language skills through meaningful and engaging activities.

Table 1 – English Language Proficiency (Pre-test vs Post-test)

Group	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)	Improvement
Experimental	61.2 (5.3)	85.4 (4.7)	+24.2

(n=30)			
Control (n=30)	62.1 (5.6)	71.8 (5.2)	+9.7

2. Cognitive and Creative Skills

Pre-test results showed that both groups had similar cognitive and creative skills: 58.5 for the experimental group and 59.3 for the control group. This suggests that both groups started with comparable problem-solving abilities and creative thinking skills.

The post-test results revealed a remarkable increase in the experimental group, scoring 82.7 points on average, while the control group reached 70.1 points. This indicates that integrating art therapy and gamified activities not only improved language skills but also stimulated critical thinking and creativity. During the course, students successfully completed tasks such as designing tourist itineraries, role-playing client interactions, and solving real-life tourism problems, demonstrating enhanced analytical and creative abilities.

Table 2 – Cognitive and Creative Skills (Pre-test vs Post-test)

Group	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)	Improvement
Experimental (n=30)	58.5 (6.0)	82.7 (5.4)	+24.2
Control (n=30)	59.3 (5.8)	70.1 (5.5)	+10.8

3. Motivation and Engagement

Initially, students' motivation was moderate: the experimental group scored 3.4, and the control group 3.3. Many participants approached tasks passively, completing them only because they were required to.

Post-test results revealed a considerable increase in motivation in the experimental group, reaching 4.6, compared to 3.8 in the control group. Gamified elements such as quests, points, badges, and team challenges encouraged students to engage actively, while art therapy exercises helped them emotionally connect with the learning process. Students reported feeling more involved, enjoying the lessons, and participating with enthusiasm, which directly contributed to their overall language development and confidence.

Table 3 – Motivation and Engagement (Pre-test vs Post-test)

Group	Pre-test	Post-test	Increase
Experimental (n=30)	3.4	4.6	+1.2
Control (n=30)	3.3	3.8	+0.5

4. Emotional Engagement and Confidence

At the start of the course, many students felt anxious about speaking and lacked confidence in group activities. By the post-test, 85% of students in the experimental group reported reduced anxiety, 82% expressed higher confidence in using English, 88% enjoyed the learning process, and 90% actively participated in lessons. In contrast, the control group demonstrated smaller improvements, with only slight gains in confidence and engagement.

These findings demonstrate that the integration of art therapy and gamification significantly enhances students' emotional well-being and learning confidence. Creative tasks allowed students to express emotions safely, while gamified scenarios motivated them to participate actively, which

in turn improved both communicative and cognitive outcomes.

Table 4 – Emotional Engagement and Confidence (Pre-test vs Post-test)

Theme	Pre-test Experimental	Post-test Experimental	Pre-test Control	Post-test Control
Reduced anxiety during speaking	35%	85%	38%	40%
Confidence in using English	32%	82%	34%	45%
Enjoyment of learning	40%	88%	42%	50%
Willingness to participate	42%	90%	40%	55%

5. Professional Preparedness

Pre-test assessments showed moderate levels of professional skills among students, with scores between 3.3 and 3.5 for communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. Post-test results indicated that the experimental group improved to 4.5–4.7, while the control group only reached 3.4–3.6. The integrated course allowed students to practice realistic tourism tasks, such as interacting with clients, working in teams, and solving problems creatively.

Table 5 – Professional Preparedness (Pre-test vs Post-test)

Skill Area	Pre-test Experimental	Post-test Experimental	Pre-test Control	Post-test Control
Communication with clients	3.5	4.7	3.4	3.5
Teamwork and collaboration	3.4	4.6	3.5	3.6
Problem-solving in tourism tasks	3.3	4.5	3.2	3.4
Creativity in professional tasks	3.5	4.6	3.3	3.5

The findings indicate that combining art therapy and gamification in a foreign language course for tourism students significantly enhances not only language proficiency but also cognitive, creative, motivational, and emotional development. Pre-test and post-test comparisons clearly show that students in the experimental group made larger gains in all measured areas than the control group. These results confirm that integrating creative and gamified activities provides a supportive and stimulating learning environment, helping students develop the professional skills and confidence necessary for international tourism contexts.

Discussion

The findings of this study clearly show that combining art therapy and gamification in a foreign language course makes a real difference for tourism students. Compared to the control group, students in the experimental group not only improved their English skills but also became more confident, creative, and motivated. From the very first weeks, it was noticeable that these students approached lessons differently—they were more willing to speak, try new activities, and take risks in communication.

When it comes to language proficiency, the pre-test and post-test comparison revealed a significant jump for the experimental group. What is striking is that this improvement was not just about grammar or vocabulary—it was about using English in real situations, like simulating conversations with tourists or explaining travel itineraries. Students who were initially shy or hesitant suddenly started volunteering for role-plays and storytelling exercises. Art therapy seemed to play a key role here: drawing, digital storytelling, or creating short dramatizations helped students relax, express themselves, and feel safe making mistakes. Gamification added a playful competitive element, which made the learning process fun and engaging. Students often commented that “earning points or completing quests made the tasks feel like a game rather than homework,” which clearly boosted their participation and confidence.

The course also had a strong impact on cognitive and creative skills. Students were tasked with problem-solving challenges, designing tourist routes, or role-playing unexpected client situations. At first, many struggled to come up with creative solutions or speak spontaneously, but by the end of the course, they were able to think on their feet and propose multiple ideas in group activities. One student, for example, designed a mock sightseeing tour that included cultural storytelling and interactive games for tourists—a task that required both creativity and language accuracy. This illustrates how integrating art and gamification stimulates thinking beyond memorization, helping students apply knowledge in realistic contexts.

Motivation and engagement were another area where the experimental group clearly excelled. Pre-course, several students admitted they were only “going through the motions” in language lessons. By the end, most reported enjoying the classes, participating actively, and even helping peers in team challenges. Small things like awarding badges for completing tasks or unlocking a “tour guide level” in a role-play made a noticeable difference. Combining these game elements with creative tasks created a positive feedback loop: students were motivated to try, they succeeded, and their confidence grew.

Finally, professional preparedness—arguably the most important outcome for tourism students—improved considerably. By practicing realistic scenarios such as handling client complaints, guiding virtual tours, or collaborating in team-based challenges, students developed skills they could use in their future careers. Their ability to communicate clearly, solve problems creatively, and work collaboratively was visibly stronger than that of the control group. Several students reported feeling ready to face real-world situations, which shows that the course helped bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Of course, the study had some limitations. The sample was limited to first-year students at a single university, and the course lasted only 12 weeks. We cannot be certain how well these improvements will be retained long-term, or how the approach would work with older students or in other institutions. Future research could explore larger samples, longer-term effects, and additional

combinations of gamification and creative activities, perhaps incorporating more technology like virtual reality or mobile apps.

In summary, the study suggests that foreign language teaching in tourism can benefit immensely from combining art therapy and gamification. The approach makes lessons more engaging, reduces anxiety, stimulates creativity, and develops practical skills. Most importantly, students leave the course not just with better language knowledge, but with confidence, motivation, and professional readiness—qualities that are crucial in the fast-paced, intercultural world of tourism.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that integrating art therapy and gamification into a foreign language course can have a profound impact on tourism students' learning outcomes. Students who participated in the experimental course showed significant improvements in English language proficiency, cognitive and creative skills, motivation, emotional engagement, and professional preparedness compared to those in a traditional language course.

The combination of creative exercises and gamified activities created a supportive and engaging environment where students felt confident to practice English, express their ideas, and take risks in communication. Art therapy helped reduce anxiety and allowed students to connect emotionally with the learning process, while gamification provided motivation, a sense of achievement, and opportunities to apply language skills in realistic tourism scenarios.

These findings suggest that traditional language teaching methods, which often focus mainly on grammar and vocabulary, may be limited in preparing students for the practical and interpersonal demands of the tourism industry. Incorporating creative and gamified approaches not only enhances language learning but also fosters critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork, and professional readiness.

Based on these results, it is recommended that tourism educators integrate art therapy activities and gamified elements into foreign language courses to enhance students' motivation, engagement, creativity, and professional preparedness. Creative exercises such as storytelling, drawing, and role-playing, combined with game mechanics like points, levels, quests, and team challenges, can provide a supportive and interactive learning environment that strengthens language proficiency, emotional well-being, and practical skills necessary for success in the international tourism industry.

Finally, while the results are promising, further research is recommended with larger and more diverse student groups, as well as longitudinal studies to assess long-term retention of language skills, cognitive abilities, and professional competencies. Nevertheless, the study highlights the clear benefits of innovative, student-centered teaching approaches in higher education for the tourism sector.

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ШЕТЕЛ ТІЛІН ОҚЫТУДА АРТ-ТЕРАПИЯ МЕН ГЕЙМИФИКАЦИЯНЫ БІРІКТІРУ: ТУРИЗМ САЛАСЫНА АРНАЛҒАН КУРС ӘЗІРЛЕУ

Аңдатпа. Бұл зерттеу туризм мамандығы студенттеріне арналған шетел тілін оқытудың тиімділігін арттыру мақсатында арт-терапия мен геймификация тәсілдерін біріктіріп жасалған интеграциялық курстың нәтижелілігін талдайды. Түркістан қаласындағы Халықаралық туризм және меймандостық университетінің 60 бірінші курс студенті зерттеуге қатысып, олардың 30-ы эксперименттік топқа, ал қалған 30-ы бақылау тобына бөлінді. Тілдік дағдылар мен когнитивтік қабілеттерді бағалау үшін алдын ала және қорытынды тесттер, ал мотивация, эмоциялық қатысу және кәсіби даярлық деңгейін анықтау үшін сауалнама мен сұхбат жүргізілді.

Зерттеу нәтижелері эксперименттік топтағы студенттердің ағылшын тілі деңгейі, шығармашылық ойлау қабілеті, оқуға деген ынтасы және кәсіби дайындық көрсеткіштері бақылау тобымен салыстырғанда едәуір жақсарғанын көрсетті. Арт-терапия студенттердің мазасыздығын төмендетіп, эмоционалды белсенділігін арттырды, ал геймификация элементтері олардың сабаққа белсенді қатысуына және тілдік білімді туризм саласындағы нақты жағдайларда қолдана білуіне ықпал етті.

Зерттеу қорытындысы бойынша, шығармашылық және ойын арқылы оқыту тәсілдерін үйлестіре қолдану болашақ туризм мамандарына тілдік және кәсіби құзыреттерін тиімді әрі қызықты форматта дамытуға мүмкіндік беретін заманауи педагогикалық шешім болып табылады.

Кілт сөздер: туризм саласындағы білім беру, шетел тілін оқыту, арт-терапия, геймификация, когнитивтік дағдылар, кәсіби даярлық.

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ИНТЕГРАЦИЯ АРТ-ТЕРАПИИ И ГЕЙМИФИКАЦИИ В ОБУЧЕНИЕ ИНОСТРАННЫМ ЯЗЫКАМ: РАЗРАБОТКА КУРСА ДЛЯ ТУРИСТСКОЙ СФЕРЫ

Аннотация. Настоящее исследование направлено на анализ эффективности интегрированного курса обучения иностранному языку для студентов туристской специальности, в основу которого положено сочетание методов арт-терапии и геймификации. В эксперименте приняли участие 60 студентов первого курса Международного университета туризма и гостеприимства (г. Туркестан), из которых 30

составили экспериментальную группу, а 30 — контрольную. Для оценки динамики языковой подготовки и когнитивных способностей были проведены входные и итоговые тестирования, а также использованы анкеты и интервью для измерения уровня мотивации, эмоциональной вовлеченности и профессиональной готовности студентов.

Результаты исследования показали, что участники экспериментальной группы продемонстрировали статистически значимое повышение уровня владения английским языком, креативности, учебной мотивации и профессиональной компетентности по сравнению с контрольной группой. Применение арт-терапии способствовало снижению уровня тревожности и повышению эмоциональной устойчивости обучающихся, тогда как использование геймифицированных заданий усилило вовлеченность и способствовало практическому применению языковых навыков в профессионально-ориентированных ситуациях туристской сферы.

Таким образом, интеграция креативных и игровых подходов в процесс обучения иностранным языкам обеспечивает формирование эффективной, эмоционально насыщенной и профессионально направленной образовательной среды, способствующей комплексному развитию языковых и профессиональных компетенций будущих специалистов в области туризма.

Ключевые слова: образование в сфере туризма, обучение иностранным языкам, арт-терапия, геймификация, когнитивные навыки, профессиональная компетентность.