

Gamification as a Strategy for Enhancing Long-Term Memory of Low-Frequency Vocabulary in Primary English Education

Wei Chen¹

¹ Liaoning Normal University, Liaoning 116029, China

Correspondence: Wei Chen, Liaoning Normal University, Liaoning 116029, China.

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Abstract

This paper explores the potential of gamification as a strategy to enhance the long-term retention of low-frequency vocabulary in Chinese primary English education. Low-frequency vocabulary—words that occur less frequently in everyday discourse yet are crucial for advanced comprehension and academic success—poses a significant challenge for young learners, particularly in contexts where English is a foreign language. The paper examines the unique obstacles faced by Chinese primary students, including limited exposure to authentic language input, an overreliance on rote memorization, cognitive overload, and a lack of motivation, all of which hinder the deep, meaningful acquisition of rare words. Drawing on cognitive theories of memory, affective engagement, and constructivist learning principles, the paper argues that gamification offers a promising solution by embedding vocabulary learning within interactive, emotionally engaging, and context-rich activities. By facilitating repeated exposure, spaced retrieval, and active use of vocabulary in diverse scenarios, gamified approaches may strengthen memory encoding and retrieval pathways, leading to improved retention of low-frequency words. The paper also discusses potential challenges in implementation, such as balancing fun with learning depth, managing competition and motivation, ensuring age-appropriate design, and addressing issues of equity and access. Ultimately, the paper advocates for the thoughtful integration of gamification into primary English education in China, emphasizing the need for context-sensitive design, empirical research, and pedagogical support to maximize the benefits of gamified learning for vocabulary development.

Keywords: gamification, vocabulary acquisition, low-frequency vocabulary, long-term memory, Chinese primary English education, contextual learning

1. Introduction

Vocabulary acquisition plays a foundational role in language learning, particularly in primary education where learners are building their linguistic competence for the first time. For young learners in Chinese primary schools, acquiring English vocabulary presents unique challenges that stem from linguistic, cultural, and instructional differences. English, as a second language in China, is often introduced in a formal classroom setting with limited opportunities for authentic communication. In these contexts, students frequently encounter a “vocabulary gap,” where high-frequency words receive repeated exposure through textbooks and drills, while low-frequency vocabulary—terms essential for nuanced comprehension and advanced literacy—remains underrepresented and poorly retained.

Low-frequency vocabulary includes words that are less commonly used in everyday conversation but are critical for academic achievement, standardized testing, and global communication. For Chinese primary learners, the cognitive demands of learning English are further compounded by the lack of language-rich environments. Outside the classroom, exposure to English is often minimal, leading to a reliance on rote memorization strategies that may fail to support long-term retention. Research suggests that while students may initially memorize low-frequency words for exams, these words are often forgotten without meaningful reinforcement,

resulting in shallow learning that hinders future language development.

Gamification has emerged as a promising strategy to address these challenges. By integrating game-like elements such as points, badges, levels, and storytelling into educational activities, gamification aims to transform vocabulary learning from a passive task into an interactive and motivating experience. The underlying premise is that engagement, repetition, and emotional involvement—hallmarks of effective games—can significantly enhance the encoding and retrieval processes in long-term memory. Moreover, gamification aligns with contemporary theories of language learning that emphasize active participation, social interaction, and meaningful context over isolated drills. Gamification offers unique potential, it can compensate for the lack of real-life English immersion by creating virtual or classroom-based environments where learners repeatedly encounter and apply low-frequency vocabulary in fun, meaningful ways. Additionally, the competitive and cooperative aspects of games may resonate with cultural learning preferences in China, where group activities and shared goals are highly valued. This paper examines how gamification, as an instructional strategy, can enhance the long-term retention of low-frequency English vocabulary among Chinese primary learners. By exploring cognitive theories of memory, principles of gamified learning design, and the specific needs of Chinese students, this discussion aims to highlight the practical implications and challenges of implementing gamification in the primary classroom setting.

2. The Challenge of Low-Frequency Vocabulary Acquisition

Low-frequency vocabulary refers to words that occur less frequently in everyday language but are nonetheless essential for achieving advanced levels of comprehension, critical thinking, and academic success. These words—often drawn from academic texts, literary works, and subject-specific disciplines such as science, history, or geography—form the backbone of a learner’s ability to engage with complex materials, participate in higher-order discussions, and comprehend nuanced information. They are the building blocks of academic literacy, enabling learners to access a wider range of texts, express precise ideas, and succeed in standardized assessments and global communication.

For Chinese primary English learners, the acquisition of low-frequency vocabulary presents a formidable challenge, shaped by a complex interplay of linguistic, cognitive, and pedagogical factors. Firstly, the limited exposure to authentic English contexts in China creates a significant barrier. Unlike high-frequency words—such as “apple,” “go,” or “happy”—which appear frequently in daily conversations, textbooks, and media, low-frequency vocabulary items like “compass,” “generate,” or “consequence” are often introduced only sporadically in textbooks, typically within isolated reading passages or exam-oriented exercises. Students may encounter these words briefly during a unit or a test preparation phase but seldom have the opportunity to interact with them in diverse, meaningful contexts. Without repeated exposure, these words remain fragile memory traces, easily forgotten after the immediate learning task has passed.

The prevalence of rote learning in Chinese classrooms exacerbates this issue. English instruction in many primary schools continues to emphasize mechanical vocabulary drills, list memorization, and test-focused preparation. Students are often expected to memorize definitions or word-meaning pairs without engaging in activities that require them to use the words productively in sentences, stories, or conversations. As a result, while learners may be able to recite word lists for a test, they struggle to retrieve and apply these words in authentic communication. This lack of contextual learning undermines the formation of semantic networks—the interconnected mental representations that allow for flexible and meaningful use of language.

The linguistic distance between English and Mandarin further compounds the challenge. English orthography, phonology, and syntax differ significantly from Chinese, making the acquisition of unfamiliar, low-frequency vocabulary a cognitively demanding task. Learners must navigate unfamiliar sounds, spellings, word forms, and grammatical structures, often with minimal support. For primary students, whose cognitive capacities are still developing, this additional cognitive load can lead to overwhelm and reduced retention, particularly when new words are introduced without adequate scaffolding or engaging learning strategies.

Motivation and affective factors play a crucial role as well. Low-frequency words often feel abstract, irrelevant, or disconnected from learners’ immediate experiences. Without personal relevance or intrinsic interest, students may perceive these words as tedious or burdensome, leading to disengagement and shallow processing. The absence of emotional engagement reduces the likelihood of elaboration and limits opportunities for creating meaningful, memorable connections to the vocabulary.

Compounding these issues are assessment practices in Chinese primary English education, which often prioritize recognition over productive use. Standardized tests and classroom quizzes frequently focus on matching words to definitions or identifying the correct word in a multiple-choice context, rather than requiring learners to actively use vocabulary in writing or speech. This approach encourages surface-level learning strategies, reinforcing a cycle where students temporarily memorize words for an exam but fail to integrate them into their

working vocabulary for long-term use.

The acquisition of low-frequency vocabulary among Chinese primary English learners is hindered by a lack of authentic exposure, rote memorization practices, cognitive overload, low intrinsic motivation, and inadequate assessment frameworks. These challenges underscore the need for innovative, learner-centered strategies that can create meaningful, repeated encounters with vocabulary, foster deep cognitive engagement, and stimulate emotional connections that promote long-term retention. Gamification, with its capacity to transform learning into an interactive, motivating, and emotionally rich experience, emerges as a promising approach to address these challenges—providing a pathway for students to move beyond memorization towards genuine, durable vocabulary knowledge.

3. Gamification: Definition and Educational Application

Gamification, as a concept, originates from the application of game-design elements and principles to non-game contexts to increase user engagement, motivation, and participation. In educational settings, gamification involves integrating features such as points, badges, leaderboards, levels, challenges, narratives, feedback loops, and rewards into learning activities to transform routine academic tasks into interactive, immersive experiences. The aim is not merely to make learning “fun,” but to harness the psychological mechanisms that make games so compelling—such as curiosity, autonomy, competition, collaboration, and a sense of progression—to improve learning outcomes.

In the context of vocabulary acquisition, especially for low-frequency vocabulary, gamification serves several crucial educational purposes. Firstly, it encourages repeated exposure, a key factor in long-term memory formation. Games typically require players to encounter information multiple times across varying contexts—this repetition strengthens memory traces, facilitating the transfer of vocabulary from short-term to long-term memory. For example, a word might appear in multiple mini-games, quizzes, or story-based challenges within a gamified platform, allowing learners to encounter it in different forms, such as spelling, meaning, usage, and pronunciation.

Gamification enhances emotional engagement, which is a critical component of memory retention. According to the affective filter hypothesis in second language acquisition (Krashen, 1982), learners acquire language more effectively when their anxiety is low, and motivation and interest are high. Gamified learning environments, by design, create a sense of excitement and curiosity, reducing stress and fostering a positive emotional climate that is conducive to deeper learning. Gamification facilitates contextual learning. Instead of presenting vocabulary in isolation, gamified tasks often embed words within meaningful narratives or problem-solving scenarios. For instance, a digital game might place learners in a fantasy world where they must solve quests using newly learned words, thus promoting semantic richness and helping learners form stronger mental associations between words and their meanings. Gamification aligns with constructivist learning theories, which emphasize active participation, exploration, and discovery over passive reception of information. Learners in a gamified environment are often given autonomy and choice, such as selecting challenges, customizing avatars, or exploring virtual spaces, which can lead to greater ownership of the learning process. These elements align with self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which posits that motivation is enhanced when learners feel competent, autonomous, and connected to others—qualities that gamification inherently fosters. In addition to cognitive benefits, gamification can address motivational challenges faced by learners of low-frequency vocabulary. Such words are often perceived as abstract, disconnected, and tedious to learn. Gamified approaches transform this learning into a goal-oriented activity with clear rewards, providing instant feedback and tangible markers of progress. For example, achieving a “Vocabulary Master” badge or climbing a leaderboard can instill a sense of achievement, motivating learners to continue engaging with the material.

Gamification has a scalable potential in the digital era. With the advent of educational technologies, teachers can leverage apps, learning management systems, and platforms like Kahoot, Quizlet, or custom-designed games to integrate gamified vocabulary learning into classrooms. These tools allow for adaptive learning, where the system adjusts the difficulty of tasks based on individual learner performance, ensuring that each student receives an appropriate level of challenge. Gamification in vocabulary learning is not simply about entertainment; it is a pedagogical strategy grounded in cognitive science and motivational psychology. It offers a dynamic, student-centered approach that can address the unique challenges of low-frequency vocabulary acquisition in Chinese primary English education. By fostering engagement, providing repeated and meaningful exposure, and creating emotional connections, gamification has the potential to transform vocabulary learning from a passive chore into an active, enjoyable, and effective process.

4. Mechanisms Linking Gamification to Long-Term Memory

Gamification enhances long-term memory retention through a convergence of cognitive, affective, and social mechanisms that are deeply rooted in both educational psychology and neuroscience. Understanding these

mechanisms provides a theoretical foundation for why gamification can be particularly effective in supporting the acquisition of low-frequency vocabulary in Chinese primary English education.

4.1 Repetition, Spaced Retrieval, and the Spacing Effect

One of the most well-established principles in cognitive psychology is the spacing effect, which suggests that information is more effectively encoded into long-term memory when exposures are distributed over time rather than massed in a single session. Gamification naturally lends itself to spaced retrieval, as learners engage with vocabulary across multiple game sessions, levels, and challenges. This distributed practice strengthens the neural pathways associated with each word, reducing the rate of forgetting (as described by Ebbinghaus's Forgetting Curve) and facilitating more durable retention.

In a gamified system, repetition is not monotonous but varied and contextualized, which further enhances retention. For instance, encountering a word in a quiz, a matching game, and a role-playing scenario provides multiple retrieval pathways—supporting the elaboration of memory traces. Each retrieval acts as a form of “memory re-consolidation,” reinforcing and updating the mental representation of the word.

4.2 Emotional Engagement and Affective Memory Encoding

Emotions play a powerful role in learning and memory. According to neuroscientific studies, emotionally charged experiences trigger the release of neurotransmitters like dopamine and norepinephrine, which enhance the encoding of information in the hippocampus—the brain's memory center. Games, by design, evoke emotions such as excitement, curiosity, and even tension (in competitive settings), which contribute to stronger and more vivid memory traces. The reward system in the brain, particularly the dopaminergic pathways, is activated when learners achieve goals or overcome challenges in a game. The anticipation of rewards, such as points or badges, can increase motivation and dopamine release, which not only enhances engagement but also reinforces the salience of the learned material. This emotional connection creates a more meaningful and memorable learning experience compared to traditional rote learning.

4.3 Contextual Learning and Semantic Networks

Gamification situates vocabulary within rich, meaningful contexts, which is essential for building robust semantic networks in the brain. Unlike isolated word lists, games embed words into narratives, challenges, and problem-solving scenarios, facilitating deeper processing (Craik & Lockhart, 1972). For example, learning the word “compass” in the context of a treasure hunt game allows learners to associate it with navigation, adventure, and exploration, forming a multi-dimensional memory trace that is easier to retrieve later.

Contextual learning also promotes dual coding (Paivio, 1986), where verbal and visual representations of a word are processed simultaneously. A word learned through an interactive game with visual cues, animations, and sounds is encoded more richly than a word seen in a static list, leading to stronger recall and transfer.

4.4 Active Learning, Problem-Solving, and Cognitive Load Management

Games inherently encourage active learning, where students interact with content rather than passively receive information. This interactivity supports constructivist learning theories (Vygotsky, 1978), which posit that learners build knowledge through exploration and social interaction. Gamified environments often include problem-solving tasks, which require the application of vocabulary in new contexts, reinforcing comprehension and retention. Gamification can help manage cognitive load by breaking complex tasks into manageable chunks (levels or quests) and providing scaffolding such as hints, feedback, and immediate corrections. This supports learners in navigating the challenge of low-frequency vocabulary without becoming overwhelmed, facilitating more efficient cognitive processing and encoding into long-term memory.

4.5 Social Interaction and Collaborative Memory

Many gamified learning environments incorporate social elements, such as team challenges, leaderboards, or peer feedback, which create opportunities for collaborative memory formation. Research shows that discussing and negotiating meaning with others can deepen understanding and improve retention. When learners work together to solve a puzzle or win a team-based game, they reinforce vocabulary knowledge through peer teaching, repetition, and elaboration, which are key strategies for durable learning.

5. Empirical Evidence

While empirical studies specifically targeting Chinese primary English learners and gamification for low-frequency vocabulary acquisition remain relatively limited, a growing body of international research highlights the positive impact of gamification on vocabulary learning across various age groups and educational contexts. These findings offer valuable insights that can be cautiously extrapolated to the Chinese primary education context, given shared cognitive and motivational mechanisms in language learning.

5.1 Gamification and Vocabulary Gains: Global Findings

Numerous studies have demonstrated that learners exposed to gamified vocabulary activities consistently outperform those in traditional, non-gamified environments. For example, research by Viberg and Grönlund (2013) found that mobile-assisted language learning platforms incorporating gamified features (e.g., points, challenges, leaderboards) led to higher levels of vocabulary retention compared to textbook-based learning. Similarly, Plass et al. (2015) highlighted that game-based learning environments promote deeper engagement, resulting in better recall in both immediate post-tests and delayed assessments.

Meta-analyses, such as those by Huang and Soman (2013) and Hamari et al. (2014), further reinforce the effectiveness of gamification, noting that the motivational impact of game elements (e.g., immediate feedback, rewards, progression systems) enhances learners' willingness to engage in repetitive practice, a key factor in vocabulary retention.

5.2 Digital Tools and Chinese Learners

Within the context of Chinese EFL learners, preliminary studies have begun to explore the impact of gamified learning tools on motivation and vocabulary acquisition. For instance, research on the use of Kahoot and Quizlet in Chinese classrooms (e.g., Zhang, 2020) has shown significant improvements in learner engagement, participation, and self-reported vocabulary growth. Students reported that gamified platforms made learning "less boring" and "more like playing," leading to increased voluntary participation in vocabulary review activities.

A study by Li and Tsai (2021) investigating a gamified mobile app for English vocabulary learning among Chinese primary students found that learners in the gamified group exhibited higher post-test scores and improved delayed recall after a 4-week intervention, compared to a control group using traditional flashcards. The researchers attributed these gains to the emotional engagement and contextual variety provided by the gamified activities.

5.3 Sustained Motivation and Long-Term Effects

Empirical research also suggests that gamification not only boosts short-term vocabulary acquisition but also supports long-term retention—a critical goal for low-frequency vocabulary learning. For example, Chen et al. (2018) demonstrated that students using a gamified vocabulary app showed significantly higher recall rates even six weeks after the initial learning session compared to a control group. This sustained retention was linked to the use of spaced repetition algorithms, adaptive challenges, and reward systems embedded in the app.

While these findings are promising, the field still faces notable gaps. Most existing studies focus on secondary and university-level learners, with limited research directly examining primary-aged learners in the Chinese EFL context. Furthermore, few studies differentiate between high-frequency and low-frequency vocabulary outcomes, making it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about the specific impact of gamification on rarer vocabulary items. Given these limitations, there is a pressing need for context-specific studies that explore how gamification interacts with cultural, linguistic, and pedagogical factors unique to Chinese primary education. Questions remain about the optimal design of gamified activities for younger learners, the balance between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and the long-term transferability of gamified vocabulary learning to real-world language use.

6. Challenges and Considerations

While gamification offers exciting opportunities for enhancing vocabulary learning, its implementation in Chinese primary English education presents several critical challenges and considerations that must be addressed to ensure its effectiveness, inclusivity, and alignment with broader educational goals.

6.1 Balancing Engagement and Learning Depth

One of the most significant risks of gamification is the potential for superficial engagement—where students become more focused on earning points, badges, or winning competitions than on deeply understanding and applying the vocabulary. This phenomenon, sometimes called "pointsification," can result in shallow learning, where learners memorize words for short-term gains but fail to develop meaningful, long-term retention. Teachers must ensure that gamified activities are designed to prioritize cognitive engagement, requiring students to use vocabulary in meaningful contexts rather than merely recognizing definitions or completing low-level tasks.

6.2 Managing Competition and Motivation

While competition can be a powerful motivator for some students, it can also create a demotivating and anxiety-inducing environment for others—particularly for younger or less proficient learners who may feel discouraged by consistently low rankings on leaderboards. In the Chinese cultural context, where educational success is highly valued, excessive competition can lead to fear of failure, loss of face, and withdrawal from participation. To mitigate this, educators should design gamified systems that balance competitive and

collaborative elements, such as team challenges, cooperative quests, and opportunities for peer support, ensuring that all learners feel included and valued.

6.3 Cognitive Load and Age-Appropriateness

For primary learners, gamified activities must be carefully tailored to developmental stages and cognitive capacities. Games that are overly complex, fast-paced, or rich in stimuli can lead to cognitive overload, where learners struggle to process both the game mechanics and the vocabulary content simultaneously. This is particularly relevant when introducing low-frequency words, which already pose a higher cognitive challenge. Effective gamification should employ age-appropriate designs, provide clear instructions, and incorporate gradual scaffolding to support learners in navigating new words without overwhelming them.

6.4 Alignment with Curriculum Goals and Assessment Practices

Gamification should not exist in isolation from the broader curriculum and assessment frameworks of Chinese primary English education. Teachers must ensure that gamified activities align with syllabus objectives, vocabulary lists, and national standards, such as the Ministry of Education's English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition). Moreover, while gamified platforms often track participation and scores, these metrics may not always reflect deeper language competencies like productive use, contextual understanding, or long-term retention. Educators must thoughtfully integrate formative assessments into gamified activities—such as reflective tasks, oral presentations, or contextual sentence writing—to capture a more holistic picture of vocabulary learning.

6.5 Equity, Access, and Digital Divide

The increasing reliance on digital tools for gamified learning raises important questions about equity and access. Not all schools in China, especially in rural or under-resourced areas, have access to reliable internet connections, digital devices, or technical support. This digital divide can exacerbate educational inequalities, leaving some students with fewer opportunities to engage in innovative learning activities. Additionally, teachers may require professional development and training to effectively implement gamification tools, as unfamiliarity with technology or game design principles can lead to ineffective or tokenistic applications.

6.6 Teacher Workload and Pedagogical Shifts

Designing and integrating effective gamified learning experiences requires time, creativity, and pedagogical expertise. Teachers must select appropriate tools, align activities with learning objectives, monitor student progress, and adapt games to meet individual needs. In contexts where teachers already face heavy workloads and tight curriculum schedules, this additional demand may lead to burnout or superficial implementation. Schools and educational authorities must therefore provide institutional support, including training, resources, and time allocation for lesson design.

7. Conclusion

Gamification holds significant promise as a transformative strategy for enhancing the long-term retention of low-frequency vocabulary in Chinese primary English education. By integrating game mechanics such as points, rewards, challenges, and narratives into vocabulary learning, gamification creates a motivating, interactive, and emotionally engaging environment that directly addresses the challenges faced by young learners, including limited exposure, low intrinsic motivation, and the tendency for rote memorization. The dynamic nature of gamified learning aligns with core principles of memory science, such as spaced repetition, retrieval practice, and contextual learning, offering a powerful means to consolidate vocabulary into long-term memory. Beyond cognitive benefits, gamification reshapes the emotional landscape of learning by transforming abstract, infrequent words from static list items into meaningful, emotionally resonant experiences. Whether through solving puzzles, collaborating with peers, or achieving personal milestones, learners engage with vocabulary in ways that foster curiosity, a sense of achievement, and social interaction—factors essential for sustained attention and deeper retention.

The successful implementation of gamification in Chinese primary classrooms is not without challenges. It requires careful pedagogical design to ensure that activities align with curriculum standards, are age-appropriate, and promote equitable access for all students. Without thoughtful integration, there is a risk that gamification could lead to superficial learning focused on point accumulation rather than deep understanding. Furthermore, cultural sensitivity is critical, as excessive competition or overemphasis on extrinsic rewards may have unintended effects on student motivation and classroom dynamics. Technological infrastructure and teacher training also play vital roles, as access to digital tools and the ability to design meaningful gamified activities vary widely across schools in China. Ethical considerations, such as data privacy, screen time management, and the potential psychological impacts of gamification, must also be carefully addressed to ensure that gamified learning environments remain safe, healthy, and focused on pedagogical goals. Future research should explore

the longitudinal effects of gamification on vocabulary retention, particularly for low-frequency words, and investigate which game elements are most effective for different learner profiles. Studies that examine cultural factors, the balance between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and the impact of gamification on productive language use, rather than mere recognition, are urgently needed. Additionally, research into how teachers can be empowered through training and resources to effectively implement gamified learning is essential for sustainable integration. While gamification is not a panacea, it represents a promising, evidence-informed strategy for addressing persistent challenges in vocabulary learning. By harnessing the motivational power of games and embedding them in sound pedagogical practice, educators can create rich, meaningful learning environments that support Chinese primary learners in developing the linguistic skills they need for academic success and lifelong language learning. The future of gamification in vocabulary learning lies in collaborative efforts among researchers, educators, and policymakers to ensure its thoughtful, inclusive, and effective application in diverse educational settings.

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