

Competitive activities that work in learning English

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ABSTRACT

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Classroom competition—implemented as individual contests, team tournaments, leaderboard systems, quizzes (e.g., Kahoot!), debates, and competitive team-based learning—remains a widely used pedagogical device in English language teaching. This literature review synthesizes empirical and review evidence (2014–2025) to identify which competitive activities produce positive outcomes for English learning (motivation, engagement, speaking, reading, vocabulary, critical thinking) and under which design constraints they succeed or fail. Findings show: (1) competitive gamified elements (points, quizzes, leaderboards) often boost short-term engagement and attainment when aligned with autonomy-supportive design; (2) poorly-designed extrinsic competition may reduce intrinsic motivation and satisfaction; (3) structured argumentative activities (debates) reliably improve speaking, fluency, and argumentation skills when scaffolded; (4) competitive team-based formats can raise motivation and collaborative skills if tasks emphasize interdependence and clear assessment rubrics. The review closes with practical design guidelines and implications for research (need for longitudinal, cross-cultural, and mixed-methods studies)

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INTRODUCTION

Competition has a long history in education as a way to stimulate effort, attention, and performance. In English language teaching (ELT) contemporary manifestations include digital quiz platforms (e.g., Kahoot!), gamified leaderboards and badges, formal classroom debates, and structured competitive team-based learning (CTBL/TBL). Recently, researchers have asked not only whether competition works, but how design choices and learner/context variables moderate effects. Several systematic reviews show

gamification and digital competition are widely used and often beneficial—yet outcomes vary with design and context. Meanwhile, pedagogical debate interventions and competitive team formats present mixed but generally positive evidence for communicative gains when tasks are well scaffolded. This review integrates those strands to answer: Which competitive activities work for which English learning outcomes, and under which design conditions?

RESEARCH METHOD

This is a narrative systematic-informed review synthesizing peer-reviewed empirical studies and systematic reviews (2014–2025). Databases consulted included Scopus, Web of Science, PubMed/PMC, and publisher platforms; search terms combined keywords such as gamification / competition / Kahoot / leaderboard / debate / team-based learning / EFL / ESL / speaking / reading / motivation. Preference was given to empirical (experimental/quasi-experimental, mixed methods, qualitative longitudinal) and recent systematic reviews. Emphasis placed on sources with accessible DOIs to ensure traceability. (Where appropriate I cite high-impact reviews and representative empirical studies)

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Results - synthesis by theme

a. Gamified competitive elements (points, badges, leaderboards, quizzes)

- Evidence summary. Systematic reviews show gamification (game elements embedded into non-game learning contexts) is widely applied in EFL/ESL and generally associated with higher engagement and short-term gains in performance and motivation; common elements include quizzes, points, badges, and leaderboards. However, outcomes vary considerably by design leaderboards and extrinsic rewards can undermine intrinsic motivation if autonomy and meaningful feedback are absent. (S. Zhang & Z. Hasim, 2023)
- Representative empirical findings. Experimental/quasi-experimental research finds that gamified quizzes and digital platforms can significantly improve vocabulary, reading comprehension, and enjoyment when implementations support social interaction and include explanatory feedback. Conversely, longitudinal work revealed some gamification configurations decreased satisfaction and intrinsic motivation when students felt overly compared or overly externally rewarded. (Cheng, J., Lu, C., & Xiao, Q, 2025)
- Design takeaways. Use competition as structured, not punitive. Combine points/leaderboards with meaningful feedback, short cycles of mastery, and options for students to choose roles (preserve autonomy). Avoid zero-sum public ranking when equity or test anxiety is a concern.

b. Quiz tournaments & classroom response systems (e.g., Kahoot!)

- Evidence summary. Meta-reviews and empirical studies on classroom quiz tools report robust increases in engagement, positive attitudes, and short-term

retention. Kahoot!-style timed quizzes leverage immediacy and social excitement, especially for vocabulary and receptive skills practice. (Wang, 2020)

- Caveats. Time-pressure and speed-rewarding formats favor quick recall over deep processing; lower-proficiency learners can feel demotivated by speed emphasis. Provide mixed item types (speed + reflective items) and pair quizzes with post-quiz discussion. (Wang, 2020)

c. *Debates and formal argumentative competition*

- Evidence summary. Structured in-class debates consistently produce gains in speaking fluency, argumentation skills, pragmatic competence, and critical thinking when students are explicitly trained in debate techniques and given scaffolds (e.g., templates, research time, feedback). Debates also increase willingness to communicate and often reduce speaking anxiety over time. (El Majidi, et.al, 2024)
- Design takeaways. Successful debate implementation requires pre-teaching of discourse moves, collaborative preparation, equitable speaking turns, and assessment rubrics that reward language quality *and* reasoning.

d. *Competitive Team-Based Learning (CTBL / TBL)*

- Evidence summary. Team-based competitive tasks—where teams compete on well-designed tasks—improve motivation, accountability, and collaborative communication. Meta-analyses in higher education show TBL improves engagement and content mastery; language classroom reports indicate improvements in writing, speaking, and peer support when tasks require interdependence. (L Burton, 2024)
- Risk & mitigation. Team competition may marginalize weaker students if roles aren't rotated; use individual accountability checks and mixed-ability teams.

e. *Psychological / affective moderators (enjoyment, anxiety, motivation)*

- Key point. Positive emotions (foreign language enjoyment, FLLE) mediate the effects of competition on learning: enjoyment broadens attention and builds resources conducive to language acquisition, while anxiety can negate gains. Gamified competition tends to increase enjoyment when it promotes competence and relatedness; it can increase anxiety where social comparison is harsh or public. (Cheng, J., Lu, C., & Xiao, Q, 2025)

2. Discussion: what works, when, and why

- a. Competition works best when it is design-aware. Competitive elements that support autonomy (choices), competence (clear progress, formative feedback), and relatedness (team interdependence) lead to positive outcomes. This aligns with self-determination theory and experimental evidence on specific game elements. (Sailer, M., Hense, J. U., Mayr, S. K., & Mandl, H, 2017)
- b. Short-term vs long-term effects. Many studies report short-term engagement/learning gains; fewer studies examine retention and long-term

transfer. Some longitudinal work warns about a novelty effect and possible decreases in intrinsic motivation if extrinsic rewards dominate. Research should therefore measure both immediate learning and sustained proficiency over time. (MD Hanus, 2015)

- c. Task alignment matters. Competitive formats map to different skills: quizzes → vocabulary/reading accuracy; debates → speaking, argumentation, fluency; team competitions → collaborative writing/speaking and project outcomes. Match the activity type to the target proficiency domain and assessment criteria.
- d. Equity & affective safeguards required. Teachers must avoid formats that publicly shame low-performing students; consider anonymous scoring, rotating roles, and private feedback. Use mixed methods to monitor affect (enjoyment vs anxiety).

Practical recommendations for teachers (brief)

- a. Use quizzes (Kahoot!-style) for quick retrieval practice, but follow with reflective discussion. (AI Wang, 2020)
- b. When using leaderboards, provide tiered or growth-based leaderboards (progress relative to self) rather than absolute rank. (S. Zhang & Z. Hasim, 2023)
- c. Implement debates with explicit scaffolding (language frames, marking rubrics, rehearsal time). (El Majidi, 2024)
- d. Prefer team competitions that require interdependence; assess both team and individual contributions.
- e. Collect regular affective data (enjoyment/anxiety) to detect negative reactions early. (Y Zeng, 2024).

Limitations of the reviewed literature & future research directions.

- a. Heavy reliance on short-term/quasi-experimental designs; need more longitudinal RCTs and mixed-methods to capture retention and affective trajectories.
- b. Cultural/contextual moderation under-explored — effectiveness may differ across educational systems and proficiency levels.
- c. Need for fine-grained dismantling studies: which *specific* competitive elements (time limit, ranking, badges) drive which outcomes, and for whom?

CONCLUSION

Competitive activities can be powerful levers in English language classrooms when thoughtfully designed to support learners' psychological needs and aligned with learning goals. Gamified quizzes and Kahoot-style activities excel for engagement and recall; debates for speaking and argumentation; and competitive team formats for collaboration and motivation. However, competition is not universally beneficial—design choices, equity safeguards, and attention to learner affect determine whether competition produces durable learning gains or undermines motivation. Teachers and researchers should adopt principled, evidence-based designs and pursue longer-term and cross-cultural research to better understand sustained effects.

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