GAME-BASED LEARNING IN UNIVERSITY-LEVEL RUSSIAN LANGUAGE COURSES: EXPLORING STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract. This paper examines the application of game-based learning (GBL) as a linguodidactic tool for advancing Russian as a foreign language (RFL) instruction within a university setting. It investigates the efficacy of game-based approaches in mitigating declining student interest, cultivating a positive learning environment, and developing both linguistic and communicative competencies. The paper presents the findings of a small-scale qualitative study and introduces the board game *Contact Game* as a specific case example of a GBL tool designed to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes in RFL instruction.

Keywords: second language acquisition (SLA), gamification, communicative competence, motivation, attitudes.

1. Introduction

In recent years, interest in integrating game-based methods into language teaching has grown due to their potential to enhance motivation and foster a more engaging learning environment. This paper explores game-based methodologies as active learning strategies applicable to RFL, Russian as a Foreign Language, instruction in higher education and presents findings from a survey examining students' perspectives on the implementation of gamified techniques in academic settings. This study addresses a gap in the research by empirically investigating the application of GBL, game-based

learning, in the under-researched area of RFL, here within the specific Estonian higher education context.

The primary research problem for this study is to determine how GBL methods can be effectively implemented in university-level RFL instruction in Estonia to overcome specific pedagogical and socio-cultural challenges. As a qualitative study, it focuses on student feed-back regarding GBL and aims to contribute to ongoing scholarly discourse in the field.

This paper is guided by two research questions: (1) What are the student perspectives on the effectiveness and challenges of GBL in RFL instruction? (2) How can these insights inform pedagogical strategies to improve student motivation and proficiency in RFL?

2. Theoretical background

The integration of gamification into higher education has attracted increasing academic interest, particularly in relation to its influence on student engagement and learning outcomes. Pelizzari (2023), in her systematic literature review "Gamification in higher education", refers to the widely accepted definition of 'gamification' as the intentional integration of game elements into non-game contexts (first suggested by Deterding et al., 2011) to enhance student learning and engagement (Pelizzari 2023: 21). This approach is grounded in the concept of 'gamefulness,' which describes the experiential and behavioral qualities of play that are inherent in games, and therefore fosters motivation and interactive learning environments (ibid., p. 22).

To provide a clearer structure for the theoretical framework, the following discussion is organized into subsections. This structure serves to highlight the connection between general GBL principles, their application in second language acquisition (SLA), the specific challenges of RFL, and the GBL evaluation model (GEM) that informed our methodology.

2.1. GENERAL PRINCIPLES OF GBL

Pelizzari's (2023) analysis of 53 selected studies highlights the use of game-based objectives, game mechanics such as levels, points, and badges, and playful thinking to create immersive educational settings. A notable finding is gamification's role in **reducing the fear of failure**, thereby encouraging exploration and learning through consequences, like adaptive game design[1] (ibid., p. 22). Pelizzari found that the primary research questions addressed in the reviewed literature focus on student **engagement** (29%), **motivation** (25%), **learning improvement** and **performance** (23%), and **achievement of learning outcomes** (19%) (ibid., p. 29). Despite the variety of approaches, Pelizzari notes inconsistencies in theoretical and empirical analyses and emphasizes the need for a structured model to guide future gamification practices in higher education (ibid., p. 21).

Extensive research on GBL reveals that students generally view its integration positively, associating it with increased **engagement**, **motivation**, and **enjoyment** in language learning (Putra & Priyatmojo, 2021; Wong et al., 2022; Awing & Nasri, 2023; Zamzami et al., 2023; Tongsom, 2023). Tongsom (2023) found that students have positive attitudes toward GBL in grammar education, viewing it as **enjoyable**, **engaging**, and **motivating**. They associate GBL with improved **comprehension**, **retention**, and valuable practice, contributing to a relaxed classroom environment and enhanced **social interaction**. Students recognize competition in GBL as a strong motivator, yet challenges such as fatigue from overuse and group dynamics persist.

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[1] The term 'adaptive game design' — or rather, the 'adaptive nature of games' — refers to a design principle that allows students to "explore, take risks, and learn from consequences" within the context of a gamified learning environment (Pelizzari, 2023: 22). As Pelizzari notes, referencing other researchers (Toda et al., 2019; Hallifax et al., 2019; Sercemeli & Baydas Onlu, 2023), this mechanism is an essential contribution of gamification to higher education because it directly reduces the fear of failure. This feature establishes an immersive and adaptive educational environment where the system dynamically accommodates learners' actions (ibid, p. 22).

2.2. GBL AND SLA

Gamified methodologies align with traditional second language teaching objectives. Specifically, they aim to cultivate **linguistic competence** by focusing on language comprehension and knowledge. They also address **communicative competence**, enabling interaction in a variety of contexts (Hymes, 1972; Celce-Murcia et al., 1995; Canale & Swain, 1980; Savignon, 2002; Cazden, 2011; Canale, 2013; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Finally, they develop **discourse competence** (Celce-Murcia et al., 1995; Nunan, 1999; CEFR, 2020), encompassing the skills required for coherent and appropriate communication in a second language, and specifically in RFL as well (Akishina & Kagan, 1997; Nuss & Kogan, 2024).

Emphasizing the importance of **pragmatic competence**, the CEFR (2020), the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, describes it as fundamental to **discourse competence**, focusing on the capacity of a language learner or user to take the initiative in communication (CEFR, 2020: 88). This initiative includes both an awareness of and ability to manage conversational turns and the broader skills required to navigate the flow of discourse, such as starting, continuing, and ending conversations, often aided by prefabricated (formulaic) phrases (ibid.).

Beyond these traditional objectives, GBL and teaching methodologies foster an environment that helps learners overcome language barriers. This is particularly relevant in addressing two key challenges in teaching Russian as a foreign language.

2.3. CONTEXTUAL CHALLENGES IN RFL

First, the morphological complexity of Russian presents significant difficulties for learners, often leading to frustration with their progress (Nuss & Kogan, 2024). Learners of Russian often face considerable obstacles that may lead to discouragement, including the high frequency of morphological errors, the difficulties associated with

variable stress patterns and figurative language, as well as the complexities of Russian linguistic and pragmatic registers, and phonetics. Given these challenges, gamified teaching strategies provide an alternative approach that fosters engagement and reduces frustration. Nuss & Kogan (2024) suggest that gamified teaching strategies can create more student-centered language learning environments by considering students' social-emotional needs and by reducing anxiety. This approach, in turn, aims to shift the perception of learning Russian from a challenging endeavor to an engaging experience, potentially increasing enrollment in RFL courses (Nuss & Kogan, 2024: 11).

Second, a key challenge arises from the collective observations of RFL teachers in Estonia, who note that students often enter higher education with a deeply ingrained negative attitude toward the Russian language. This reluctance stems from regional historical factors, particularly traumatic aspects of collective memory, and also prevailing political contexts, both of which shape perceptions of the language. As a result, teaching RFL in Estonia is not only shaped by these attitudes but also significantly complicated by them, posing a motivational challenge for educators. GBL, with its emphasis on interactive and immersive activities, provides a viable pedagogical approach for addressing these negative perceptions.

2.4. THE GBL EVALUATION MODEL (GEM)

The core principles of the game-based approach emphasized by GBL researchers are essential to enhancing students' spontaneous communication in situational contexts. These principles include **engagement/involvement** in the learning process (Whitton, 2010; Connolly et al., 2012; Bozkurt & Durak, 2018), **collaborative** learning (Dichev & Dicheva, 2017), and **intrinsic motivation** related to **collaboration** and **competition** (Connolly et al., 2012; Sailer & Homner, 2020; Kirchner-Krath et al., 2021).

To assess how effectively these GBL principles translate into meaningful learning outcomes, Oprins et al. (2015) introduced the

GBL evaluation model (GEM), a comprehensive framework designed to evaluate the impact of GBL interventions. This model aligns with the research goal in exploring the effectiveness of GBL in RFL instruction, particularly in terms of learner **engagement** and **motivation**. Drawing on Bandura's (1997) concept of **self-efficacy** – a learner's belief in their ability to complete a task – Oprins et al. argue that the motivating and engaging nature of games encourages learners to take responsibility for their learning, thereby increasing **self-efficacy** and promoting **self-directed learning** (Oprins, 2015: 328).

Alongside specific design indicators of GBL such as **challenge**, **social interaction**, **feedback**, and **control**, Oprins et al. emphasize essential learning indicators. These include affective and cognitive dimensions that influence **engagement**, **motivation**, **learning outcomes** (knowledge and skills), **self-assessment**, and **self-efficacy** (ibid., p. 340). These indicators, particularly those outlined by the GEM, provided the foundational structure for the design and content of the research instrument used here.

3. Methodological tools

A small-scale survey was developed to empirically investigate students' perceptions of GBL in RFL instruction. The survey was conducted at Tallinn University and the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences between March and April 2025. Only bachelor's degree students who had studied Russian as a foreign language were invited to participate. The study employed purposive sampling, specifically criterion sampling (Wellington, 2015; Patton, 2014; Creswell, 2014). Participants were selected based on predefined criteria: current university enrollment and prior experience learning Russian as a foreign language. However, it is important to acknowledge that as a non-probability sampling method, purposive sampling has limitations regarding the generalizability of findings to a larger number of Russian language learners beyond those meeting these specific criteria. A total of 61 responses were collected.

The study's primary research instrument was a self-administered questionnaire developed using the open-source LimeSurvey platform. This questionnaire was structured into four sections and contained 17 questions, incorporating both open- and closed-ended formats, with several utilizing a Likert scale. The open-ended questions in Section D provided qualitative insights that deepened our understanding of the impact of GBL on Russian language instruction from the students' perspective.

The data analysis employed a mixed-methods approach, combining descriptive statistics with a qualitative content analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Denscombe, 2010). Specifically, the study utilized a direct qualitative content analysis approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). This approach is deductive in nature, using an existing theory to pre-determine initial coding categories; however, codes can be modified or defined during data analysis as needed (ibid., p. 1286). The foundation of our initial coding scheme was the Game-Based Learning Evaluation Model (GEM) proposed by Oprins et al. (2015; see Section 2.4). We adapted specific features from the GEM model to focus our investigation on key learning and motivational outcomes relevant to language acquisition. The GEM framework included the following key dimensions, which became the initial coding framework for our research: **prior learning experiences** influence both learning outcomes and attitudes; **perceived learning outcomes**, specifically the impact of the game on language skills; **learning indicators** such as motivation and anxiety; **enjoyment** and **engagement**, evaluated through the relevance of game objectives and the degree of challenge provided to students; and **self-efficacy**, defined as students' belief in their ability to enhance foreign language proficiency through gaming. The categories used to analyze the textual data were organized as follows:

(I) Experienced GBL
- 'frequency of game use'
- 'types of games used'
- 'enjoyment of game-based activities'

- 'perceived relevance'
- 'perceived challenge'

(II) Perceived effectiveness of GBL
- 'perceptions of engaging learning methods'
- 'impact on writing skills'
- 'impact on pronunciation'
- 'impact on reading skills'
- 'impact on listening skills'
- 'impact on speaking skills'
- 'impact on grammar skills'
- 'impact on vocabulary'
- 'motivation increase'
- 'anxiety reduction (speaking practice)'
- 'peer collaboration/social interaction'

(III) Attitudes and suggestions
- 'motivating aspects'
- 'challenging aspects'
- 'suggestions for improvement'

It is important to acknowledge that limitations in the study's results prevent drawing precise conclusions in certain subcategories due to inconsistencies in questionnaire responses and incomplete answers across specific items. Therefore, in subcategory analyses, the number of respondents who answered the respective questions will be indicated in brackets where applicable to ensure transparency in data interpretation.

4. Students' attitudes towards game-based approach in Russian language learning

This section presents the findings from the survey, organized by the categories outlined in the methodology.

4.1. THE CATEGORY 'EXPERIENCED GBL'

The largest proportion of respondents (ca. 33%[2]) reported studying Russian for 1 semester. Additionally, 25% studied for 2 semesters, while another 25% studied for 2 or more years. This distribution offers insight into the varying levels of prior experience with the Russian language among surveyed students.

Data on the subcategory **'frequency of game use'** in Russian language classrooms (n=15) reveal considerable variation among participants. Approximately 33% reported rare engagement with games (1–2 times) or no experience at all, while 27% indicated a moderate frequency (3–5 times), 40% participated in game-based activities more regularly (6 or more times).

The types of game-based activities used in Russian language classes were analyzed, revealing the following distribution (see Table 1)[3]:

Table 1. Types of games used in Russian language classes.

Type of game-based activity	Gross percentage
Digital games (e.g., language learning apps, simulations)	53%
Board games (e.g., vocabulary games, role-playing games)	27%
Card games (e.g., flashcard games, sentence-building games)	33%
Language-focused physical games (e.g., charades, word relays)	13%
Online collaborative games (e.g., *Quizlet live*, *Kahoot*)	67%
Role-playing games (e.g., physical (non-digital) role-playing scenarios)	53%

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[2]   In the presentation of results, percentages have been rounded following standard rounding rules (0.5 and above rounded up, below 0.5 rounded down.

[3]   The survey did not specify in-classroom use alone; it measured students' general engagement with these game-based activities, which included both instructor-led activities in the classroom and autonomous use outside of class (e.g., studying with *Quizlet* at home).

A substantial percentage of students (67%) reported[4] playing online collaborative games, such as *Quizlet live* and *Kahoot*, suggesting these platforms are widely utilized. Additionally, an equal proportion of students (53%) reported engaging with digital games (e.g., language learning apps and simulations) and physical (non-digital) role-playing scenarios. Card games (e.g., flashcards and sentence-building games) were reported by 33% of students, indicating a moderate presence among game-based activities. Board games were experienced by 27% of students, while the smallest proportion (13%) engaged in language-focused physical games, such as charades or word relays.

The subcategory **'enjoyment of game-based activities'** in Russian language classes was assessed by participants (n=15) using a 5-point scale (1 = "completely disengaged and uninterested"; 5 = "highly engaged and very interested"). The results indicate a moderately positive trend in students' perception of game-based activities in Russian language teaching. The largest proportion of participants (33%) reported being "engaged and interested" (level 4), while an additional 20% indicated being "very engaged and very interested" (level 5). This suggests that over half (53%) of the participants experienced a positive level of enjoyment and engagement.

The subcategory **'perceived relevance'** (n=15). When asked about the relevance of these games to the Russian language learning objectives using a 5-point scale (1 = "not relevant at all", 5 = "extremely relevant"), a notable proportion of students (33% selecting "very relevant" and 33% selecting "extremely relevant") perceived a strong alignment. In contrast, 13% found the games "moderately relevant", and a combined 20% rated them as "slightly relevant" or "not relevant at all".

The subcategory **'perceived challenge'** (n=15) examines how students assessed the difficulty of games used in Russian as a foreign language class. Using a 5-point scale (1 = "too easy"; 5 = "overly challenging, requiring excessive effort"), students provided varied

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4   Students could choose more than one type of game-based activity.

responses. The most frequent ratings were "moderately challenging" and "challenging," each selected by 40% of participants. Only 20% of students rated the games as "easy" (levels 1 and 2), while none found them "overly challenging".

In summary, the data show that students have varying levels of experience with the Russian language and GBL. Online collaborative games are frequently used, and most students find them relevant and appropriately challenging. However, a significant minority of students are less engaged with GBL and do not perceive a strong connection between the games and learning objectives.

4.2. THE CATEGORY 'PERCEIVED EFFECTIVENESS OF GBL'

The analysis of the subcategory **'perceptions of engaging learning methods'** reveals that game-based activities were evaluated very positively. Respondents appreciated their interactive and engaging nature, emphasizing that they made learning more enjoyable and less like traditional drills. Respondents noted that the opportunity to actively use the language – whether through speaking with others, participating in scenarios or embracing the competitive aspect of 'winning' – contributed to better vocabulary retention and improved verbal communication skills. These positive perceptions are illustrated by comments such as:

> Firstly, they are of course a lot more fun than traditional learning methods. Secondly, I feel like games push everyone to contribute and learn because you can't do other activities, like being on your phone, during game activities. (R21[5])

> Honestly, the games made learning Russian way more engaging. It wasn't just boring drills. (R51).

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[5]   Hereafter, 'R=Respondent + ID number' will indicate the coding assigned to each respondent, linking their qualitative feedback to their unique questionnaire identifier.

Students highlighted the contrast with passive learning methods, noting that games promote active participation and reduce distractions. This aligns with previous research highlighting GBL's positive impact on motivation and engagement.

The survey results for the subcategory **'impact on writing skills'**[6] (n=11) indicate that students generally do not perceive GBL as particularly beneficial for improving their Russian writing proficiency. In total, 64% of respondents either "strongly disagreed" (27%) or "disagreed" (36%) that GBL contributed to their writing skills. Additionally, 27% remained neutral, "neither agreeing nor disagreeing" with the statement. Only a small minority (9%) "agreed" that GBL had helped their writing, with no respondents expressing strong agreement.

However, it is important to note that the game-based activities used by students can entail reading and writing components, albeit brief. For example, online collaborative platforms such as *Quizlet* and *Kahoot* often require active reading of prompts and answers and may necessitate writing on a computer using the Russian alphabet. Other activities, such as simulations and sentence-building games, require reading instructions and may necessitate short written responses or note-taking. Therefore, this finding suggests that the reported lack of benefit to writing proficiency may be due to the limited scope of writing typically required in these activities, which focus primarily on transcription and short-answer recall rather than complex composition or sustained creative writing.

The survey results for the subcategory **'impact on pronunciation'** (n=11) reveal a mixed perception regarding the effectiveness of GBL in enhancing Russian pronunciation skills. While a significant portion of students did not find GBL helpful – 45% either "strongly disagreed" (18%) or "disagreed" (27%) – an equal proportion reported a positive impact. Specifically, 45% of respondents "agreed" (18%) or "strongly agreed" (27%) that GBL improved their pronunciation. This mixed

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6   This subcategory, along with all subsequent subcategories in this subchapter, is based on questionnaire items that used a scale from: 1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree".

perception likely stems from the varying nature of instructor moderation and the feedback mechanisms across the activities utilized. There are games with automated technical feedback (platforms like *Quizlet*), which can entail automated pronunciation checkers to provide immediate, system-based technical feedback on verbal input, contributing to the positive impact reported by some students; human moderation (activities such as physical role-playing scenarios and language-focused physical games, e.g., charades) can be observed and assessed by the instructor, allowing for personalized, human moderation and direct feedback on pronunciation; content scoring only (other online collaborative platforms like *Kahoot*) typically assign points for the correctness of content (multiple-choice answers) but generally do not provide moderation or scoring for pronunciation, which may contribute to the perception of low impact.

The survey results for the subcategory **'impact on reading skills'** (n=11) indicate a mixed to slightly negative perception of GBL's effectiveness in enhancing Russian reading proficiency. A significant proportion of students (54%) either "strongly disagreed" (27%) or "disagreed" (27%) that GBL supported their reading skills. Conversely, a smaller yet notable percentage (36%) either "agreed" (27%) or "strongly agreed" (9%) that it was beneficial. A minority (9%) remained neutral.

The survey results for the subcategory **'impact on listening skills'** (n=11) indicate a predominantly negative to mixed perception of GBL's effectiveness in enhancing Russian listening proficiency. 45% of students either "strongly disagreed" (36%) or "disagreed" (9%) that GBL improved their listening skills, while 36% expressed a positive impact (18% "agreed", 18% "strongly agreed"). A notable minority (18%) remained neutral.

The survey results for the subcategory **'impact on speaking skills'** (n=11) reveal a mixed perception of GBL's effectiveness in enhancing Russian speaking proficiency. An equal proportion of students (45%) either "strongly disagreed" (27%) or "disagreed" (18%) that GBL improved their speaking skills, while another 45% reported a positive

impact (27% "agreed", 18% "strongly agreed"). A minority (9%) remained neutral. These findings highlight the lack of clear consensus on the role of game-based activities in speaking skill development, with opinions nearly evenly divided between those who found them beneficial and those who did not. A formal statistical correlation between the specific type of game used and the perceived impact on speaking skills was not performed as it fell outside the scope of the current analysis. However, given the strong division in attitudes, it can be hypothesized that the students reporting a positive impact were primarily engaging with activities that demand verbal output, such as physical role-playing scenarios and language-focused physical games. Conversely, those reporting a negative impact likely focused on platform-based activities (e.g., *Quizlet* or *Kahoot*) which require less sustained, spontaneous verbal production.

The survey results for the subcategory **'impact on grammar skills'** (n=11) suggest a predominantly neutral perception of GBL's effectiveness in improving Russian grammar. A significant portion of respondents (45%) selected the neutral option, while 36% either "strongly disagreed" (27%) or "disagreed" (9%) that GBL had a positive impact. Only 18% "agreed", with no respondents expressing strong agreement. It is evident that most students did not perceive a clear benefit from game-based activities in this area, with a notable group considering them ineffective and only a small minority finding them helpful.

The survey results for the subcategory **'impact on vocabulary'** (n=11) suggest a generally positive, though slightly mixed, perception of GBL's effectiveness in enhancing Russian vocabulary acquisition. The majority of students (55%) either "agreed" (27%) or "strongly agreed" (27%) that GBL improved their vocabulary, while 45% either "strongly disagreed" (18%) or "disagreed" (27%) with this statement. Notably, no respondents selected the neutral option.

The survey results for the subcategory **'motivation increase'** (n=11) reveal a mixed yet generally positive perception of GBL's impact on students' motivation to learn Russian. The majority (55%) reported increased motivation, with 45% "strongly agreeing" and

9% "agreeing" that GBL enhanced their motivation. In contrast, 36% "strongly disagreed", while no respondents selected "disagreed". An additional 9% remained neutral. The findings demonstrate that while GBL significantly boosts motivation for many students, it does not have a universally positive effect, as a notable group perceived no motivational benefit from this approach. It is important to qualify the "strongly disagreed" finding: the motivation item was designed to capture the *increase* in motivation and, therefore, the 36% figure reflects the absence of a positive motivational effect. The survey was not explicitly designed to capture active negative motivational states such as frustration or boredom. However, the inclusion of a separate category, '**anxiety reduction (speaking practice)**,' confirms that the survey was sensitive to the measurement of negative emotional outcomes related to GBL use.

The survey results for the subcategory **'anxiety reduction (speaking practice)'** (n=11) indicate a mixed to predominantly negative perception of GBL's effectiveness in reducing anxiety about speaking Russian. A significant proportion of students (45%) either "strongly disagreed" (36%) or "disagreed" (9%) that GBL alleviated their speaking anxiety, while 36% reported a positive impact (9% "agreed", 27% "strongly agreed"). An additional 18% remained neutral. Thus, some students experienced reduced anxiety through game-based activities, a larger group did not find them effective for this purpose, with a notable segment expressing ambivalence.

The survey results for the subcategory **'peer collaboration/social interaction'** (n=11) suggest a mixed perception, with a slight positive leaning, regarding GBL's role in facilitating collaborative learning. 45% of respondents either "agreed" (18%) or "strongly agreed" (27%) that GBL supported peer collaboration, while 36% either "strongly disagreed" (18%) or "disagreed" (18%). An additional 18% remained neutral. Thus, a considerable portion of students viewed game-based activities as beneficial for collaborative learning and social interaction, and a significant number did not, highlighting variability in students' experiences with this approach.

4.3. THE CATEGORY 'STUDENT ATTITUDES AND SUGGESTIONS'

The subcategory **'motivating aspects'** examines students' perceptions of GBL's broader benefits, particularly in consolidating knowledge and enhancing practical application. Survey results comparing GBL's effectiveness to traditional methods in aiding retention of Russian language concepts, grammar, and vocabulary (n=11, scale: 1 = "much less effective", 5 = "much more effective") indicate a predominantly positive perception. A clear majority (64%) found GBL "more effective" for retention, with 36% rating it as "more effective" and 27% as "much more effective". Conversely, 27% perceived GBL as "less effective" (18% "much less effective", 9% "less effective"), while 9% considered it equally effective.

Regarding GBL's impact on students' ability to apply Russian skills in practical situations, perceptions are mixed but slightly positive (n=11, scale: 1 = "strongly disagree", 5 = "strongly agree"). While 45% "agreed" (18%) or "strongly agreed" (27%) that GBL enhanced their practical application, 27% remained neutral. Conversely, 27% either "strongly disagreed" (18%) or "disagreed" (9%). In summary, students largely view GBL as effective for retention and memorization, but its impact on practical application is less definitive.

Qualitative responses regarding the subcategory **'challenging aspects'** of game-based activities in Russian language classes highlight several areas for improvement. A key concern among students was the pressure and anxiety associated with performing quickly and speaking publicly in Russian. Many students found the limited thinking time in games stressful, leading to uncertainty about answering correctly. As one respondent noted, with game-based activities, one has much less time to think about your answers, which can make you feel unsure or anxious about responding quickly and correctly. Group dynamics and classroom management also posed challenges, particularly in larger classes, where disorganization or lack of seriousness could arise. Additionally, some students expressed concerns about the level of difficulty in certain games and a perceived shift in focus from learning to winning, which at times overshadowed educational objectives.

The results for the subcategory **'suggestions for improvement'** highlight students' willingness to integrate more GBL into Russian language classes (scale: 1 = "do not recommend at all", 5 = "strongly recommend"). A significant majority (78%) expressed a positive recommendation, with 56% strongly endorsing GBL and 22% recommending it confidently. Notably, no students remained neutral, while 22% provided a negative recommendation – 11% opposed GBL entirely, and 11% expressed reservations. These results underscore the strong student support for GBL and its perceived benefits for Russian language instruction.

5. The *Contact Game* as an example of game-based implementation in Russian language classes

The above data demonstrates that students' attitudes toward GBL are complex: they highly value the motivational and communicative potential of games but doubt their impact on basic language skills and experience stress in fast-paced environments. In this regard, it is useful to refer to a specific example — the board game *Contact Game*, which illustrates the possibilities of gamification in Russian as a foreign language and allows us to compare empirical results with teaching practice.

This section presents an example of the *Contact Game*, a tabletop simulation frequently employed as a pedagogical tool. The game may be utilized both to foster general language proficiency and to enhance communication competencies within professional contexts. Furthermore, it offers learners the opportunity to engage with the material in a creative and interactive manner.

The *Contact Game* series (Mironov et al., 2014) was designed for teaching French, Russian, and Estonian as foreign languages, with scenarios set in cities where the target language holds official status – Paris for French, Moscow for Russian, and Tallinn for Estonian. The Russian-language version is intended for CEFR levels A2–B2 (2011).

This board game simulates real-life interactions, requiring players to communicate across various situations, such as shopping, navigating the city, or making phone calls. Scenarios range from practical problem-solving (e.g., explaining directions or recovering a lost item) to complex social challenges (e.g., negotiating overdue rent).

The game board features a stylized city map, guiding players through locations indicated on game cards. Playing pieces are wooden and customizable, while passports allow role selection, fostering immersion. The set includes 40 cards each in *Contact*, *Situation*, *Action*, and *Culture*; 10 each in *Challenge* and *Rest*; and 20 *in Vocabulary*, ensuring varied communicative experiences.

The *Contact Game* enhances *communication skills*, *cultural awareness*, and *non-verbal expression*, integrating humor, role-play, and *discovery-based learning*. Without assessment or grading, students freely engage their creativity and imagination.

The game is supported by a teacher's guide (the card *Inspiration*) and a student portfolio. Teachers act as observers, identifying challenges rather than intervening, allowing students to navigate difficulties independently. Game duration and rules – such as turn-taking – should be agreed upon in advance.

Beyond fostering oral proficiency, the game also supports writing skill development. Writing skill development is supported by exercises based on the communicative scenarios of the game, which fall within the teacher's responsibilities to assign. These exercises require learners to produce written notes and tasks related to game scenarios and situations, and can be assigned both during and following the communicative activities.

During the *Contact Game*, the teacher primarily acts as an observer, identifying any difficulties students may encounter. Direct assistance or guidance during gameplay is discouraged. Instead, teachers are encouraged to take notes or record the session (with prior student consent) to gather material for later feedback.

The duration of the game and behavioral rules – such as classroom polling and turn-taking procedures – should be established by

instructors beforehand to prevent interruptions that could disrupt the flow of the activity or diminish student enthusiasm.

The game has been implemented in Estonian high schools, at Tallinn University, and at the University of Applied Sciences in Burgenland, Austria, producing varied outcomes based on students' linguistic backgrounds. Estonian and Czech students often demonstrated greater familiarity with Russian realities due to historical ties with the Soviet Union, while American and Austrian learners required additional cultural context. For instance, idiomatic expressions like „*Присядем на дорожку!*" *(Prisjadem na dorozhku!)* – *"Let's sit down before the journey"* – required cultural scaffolding for nearly all learners. However, the example is intended to illustrate the type of cultural context required, not the difference in initial knowledge of that specific idiom. The core distinction remained that the Estonian and Czech students – due to historical and geographical proximity – had a broader foundation of shared social and historical context related to Russian-speaking realities, which allowed them to internalize the explanation and use the phrase more quickly than the American and Austrian students, who required more fundamental cultural scaffolding before the meaning could be fully integrated. Translations (e.g., „*Kurz vor dem Weg sitzen*" (German) and „*Enne teele asumist võtame hetke vaikust*" (Estonian)) helped clarify meaning.

Feedback is an important component, focusing on individual progress rather than comparison. Some students limit their language use due to vocabulary constraints or fear of mistakes, but teachers can encourage broader expression.

Students often minimize their effort and rely on a limited set of phrases, possibly due to insufficient vocabulary or a fear of making mistakes – even though errors are entirely acceptable within the game context. In such cases, the teacher may encourage learners to expand their use of expressions and structures, particularly if the group is less active or experiencing difficulty.

Since 2015, observations highlight the game's effectiveness in RFL instruction. *Contact Game* supports learning across cognitive stages:

reproductive (memorization of words, grammar, and expressions), *constructive* (application of knowledge in diverse communicative contexts) and *creative* (simulation of real-life interactions in Russian). *Contact Game* enhances practical language use by providing interactive, immersive scenarios, preparing learners for real-world communication.

Discussion

This study investigated the potential of GBL to enhance RFL instruction in the unique socio-cultural and pedagogical context of Estonian higher education. Our qualitative findings, guided by the GEM, both affirm GBL's strengths in the affective domain and highlight crucial limitations regarding skill-specific effectiveness.

The survey results strongly support the use of GBL for enhancing student engagement and motivation, aligning with previous research (e.g., Tongsom, 2023) and the affective dimensions of the GEM framework. With a high percentage of students reporting enjoyment (53% highly engaged) and perceived relevance (66%), GBL successfully transforms language learning into a less stressful, more active process.

Despite the affective and motivational benefits, the findings also revealed a certain disconnect: while students appreciate the general concept of GBL, they are skeptical of its effectiveness in improving specific, foundational language skills such as writing, grammar, and listening. This aspect highlights the need for carefully designed GBL strategies that align with complex learning objectives. Practical challenges, such as concerns about game fatigue and group collaboration difficulties, were also identified, aligning with previous research. The findings of this study provide a localized snapshot of student perceptions, thereby offering a foundation for future, context-specific research on GBL in RFL within the Estonian educational landscape. Future research should also explore objective measures of proficiency gains and the long-term effects of GBL integration in RFL.

Conclusion

This study analyzed students' experiences with GBL in Russian language classrooms, highlighting diverse language-learning backgrounds and varying levels of exposure to gaming methods. Our findings indicate that while GBL is perceived as engaging and beneficial for vocabulary acquisition and motivation, its effectiveness varied across different language skills, with a limited impact perceived on writing and listening.

The positive student endorsement of GBL for vocabulary acquisition and enhanced engagement provides empirical support for the GEM framework's emphasis on affective learning dimensions. More critically, by creating a low-pressure and enjoyable learning environment, GBL contributes to addressing the socio-cultural challenges of negative attitudes toward Russian, potentially shifting the perception of the language from a source of frustration to a more rewarding experience.

Although most students found game-based activities relevant to learning objectives, perceptions of their impact on speaking, listening, grammar, and writing skills were mixed or negative. Survey results suggest that students appreciate collaborative learning aspects but acknowledge challenges such as performance pressure, group dynamics, and game design limitations. Despite these concerns, most students advocate for the continued use of GBL, emphasizing its potential in enhancing retention and active participation. Activities like the *Contact Game* illustrate how GBL can cultivate communicative competence by simulating real-world scenarios and reducing anxiety.

Finally, while this study provides valuable insights, a larger-scale quantitative study is necessary to validate these findings and explore the long-term effects of GBL on RFL proficiency. Future research should explore strategies for optimizing GBL design to effectively address skill-specific learning challenges.

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RESÜMEE

MÄNGUPÕHINE VENE KEELE ÕPE KÕRGKOOLIS: ÜLIÕPILASTE PERSPEKTIIVI UURIMINE

Artikkel käsitleb mängupõhise õppe (GBL) rakendamist keeleõppe vahendina vene keele kui võõrkeele (RFL) õpetamisel ülikoolis. Uuritakse mängupõhise lähenemisviisi tõhusust üliõpilaste motivatsiooni hoidmisel, positiivse õpikeskkonna loomisel ning keele- ja suhtlusoskuste arendamisel. Artiklis esitatakse väikesemahulise kvalitatiivse uuringu tulemused ja tutvustatakse lauamängu „Contact Game" kui näidet sellest, kuidas saab mängupõhist lähenemist rakendada üliõpilaste kaasatuse ja keeleoskuse parandamiseks vene keele kui võõrkeele õpetamisel.

Märksõnad: teise keele omandamine (SLA), mängustamine, kommunikatiivne pädevus, motivatsioon, hoiakud

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