

Using a Gamified A-STAR Reward System to Enhance Motivation and Engagement in ESL Learning among Primary School Pupils

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effectiveness of the A-STAR Reward System, a gamified motivational intervention designed to improve motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes among underprivileged pupils in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms. Grounded in the Theory of Planned Behaviour and guided by an action research framework informed by design-based research principles, the intervention was implemented over a ten-month instructional cycle in an authentic primary school setting. The study followed the action research phases of Plan, Act, Observe, and Reflect. Participants comprised pupils from Year 1 to Year 6 at SKTR1. A mixed-methods approach was used to gather data. Quantitative data were collected from pupils' mid-term and final English examination results to measure changes in academic performance. Qualitative data were obtained through classroom observations, student feedback, and records of motivational behaviours during lessons. The findings indicate significant improvements in pupils' motivation and engagement within the ESL classroom, which were associated with enhanced academic performance, increased classroom participation, and more positive attitudes towards learning English. Continuous reflection and refinement across multiple action research cycles strengthened the relevance and effectiveness of the A-STAR reward system. Overall, the study provides empirical support for the use of gamified, reward-based interventions as a cost-effective and pedagogically viable strategy for enhancing motivation and engagement among underserved ESL learners. These findings offer valuable contributions to the growing body of literature on gamified language learning and classroom-based motivational practices.

Keywords: A-STAR Reward System, action research, ESL learning, gamification, student motivation

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite curriculum improvements, current ESL practices remain largely teacher-centred and exam-oriented, leading to low student participation, limited confidence, and poor vocabulary retention (James et al., 2023). These practices face persistent constraints, including limited resources, inadequate support, and few opportunities for authentic language practice (Hashim et al., 2025; James et al., 2023), compounded by teachers' heavy non-teaching workloads such as counselling, grading, extracurriculars, and parent communications (Wei et al., 2024). Consequently, students experience low motivation and heightened language anxiety, revealing a critical gap in pedagogical approaches (Mazlan et al., 2023).

In response, gamification has emerged as a promising strategy by incorporating game design elements into learning environments to increase engagement and motivation (Laksanasut, 2025; Mee et al., 2022). Through structured reward mechanisms, this approach supports the

development of core language skills while fostering a more interactive and less anxiety-inducing ESL learning experience, particularly in contexts where traditional methods have proven inadequate (Arip & Hashim, 2024; Palaniappan & Kamsin, 2025). Furthermore, gamification leverages elements such as structured rewards, often found in game-based tools, to build vocabulary, improve grammar, and strengthen core language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Hashim et al., 2025).

This study explores the use of an innovative gamified reward system, specifically the A-STAR reward system, to enhance motivation and engagement in English as a Second Language learning among students aged 7 to 12 at a primary school in Malaysia, specifically Sekolah Rendah Taman Rinting 1, Johor.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section explains the concepts of gamification, its pertinence to motivation and rewards in the ESL classroom, and the associated theoretical framework.

2.1 Reward and Motivation in ESL Learning

Owing to various limitations, primary school students in ESL classrooms encounter significant motivational challenges (Halim et al., 2020; James et al., 2023; Mazlan et al., 2023). These challenges often stem from a lack of confidence and the perceived difficulty of acquiring a new language, particularly when learning resources are scarce (Hashim et al., 2025). Such intrinsic motivational deficits are often exacerbated by extrinsic factors, including socio-economic disadvantages and limited exposure to English outside the academic setting, necessitating pedagogical interventions that can effectively bridge these gaps.

Rewards are regarded as a potent extrinsic motivator, capable of fostering engagement and sustaining persistence in language acquisition through tangible or intangible incentives tied to the attainment of learning objectives (Thurairasu, 2022). This is particularly critical in ESL contexts where motivation is a key predictor of success in language learning (Benitez-Correa et al., 2025). Rewards can take many forms such as points, badges, leaderboards, and virtual currencies, which are designed to stimulate students' desire to complete activities and achieve learning milestones (Arip & Hashim, 2024; Yacob et al., 2022). For instance, points can be awarded for correctly answered quizzes or completed tasks, while badges can represent achievements in vocabulary acquisition (Laksanasut, 2025).

2.2 Gamification in ESL Learning

Gamification approaches can enhance rewards and motivation in ESL classrooms (Yacob et al., 2022; Yunus & Tan, 2021) by transforming routine activities into engaging experiences that leverage psychological principles such as operant conditioning and constructivism (Quba et al., 2024).

Gamification represents an effective pedagogical approach for integrating rewards and enhancing motivation in ESL learning. In the ESL context, it refers to the strategic integration of game mechanics, dynamics, and elements such as badges, leader boards, points, quests, challenges, levels, immediate feedback, and narrative contexts into language learning activities to make them more engaging, interactive, and intrinsically motivating (Arip & Hashim, 2024; Laksanasut, 2025; Yacob et al., 2022). Specifically, gamified systems significantly enhance task completion rates and student interest by transforming conventional language tasks into stimulating challenges that foster dynamic environments, greater participation, and improved retention (Hashim et al., 2025; Laksanasut, 2025; Quba et al., 2024; Thurairasu, 2022). Moreover,

this approach stimulates competitive spirits, provides clear instructions, promotes active learning, and diminishes anxiety often associated with traditional instruction (Laksanasut, 2025; Yacob et al., 2022). Eventually, such integration results in heightened student engagement, improved language proficiency, and enhanced communication skills through an enjoyable learning process (Arip & Hashim, 2024; Hashim et al., 2025).

2.3 Reward-Based Gamification in the ESL Classroom

In ESL contexts, reward-oriented gamification uses extrinsic incentives such as points, badges, and leaderboards to promote regular practice, task completion, and enthusiastic participation (Laksanasut, 2025; Yacob et al., 2022). This technique leverages positive reinforcement, where concrete or digital rewards affirm progress and spur ongoing involvement (Yacob et al., 2022). Research shows these frameworks foster enduring engagement and determination (Laksanasut, 2025). For example, combining badges, points, and leaderboards structures competitions, denotes achievements, and motivates learners to invest more effort in language skills (Laksanasut, 2025; Thurairasu, 2022; Yunus & Tan, 2021). Studies confirm these elements boost participation in disadvantaged primary schools, countering low intrinsic motivation, shifting students from passive to active engagement, and elevating proficiency (Duisenova & Zhorabekova, 2024; Hashim et al., 2025; Sigalingging et al., 2023; Yacob et al., 2022). This aligns with motivational theories, enhancing self-efficacy and positive attitudes toward ESL learning (Malage & Watini, 2024).

To address these challenges, this study introduces the A-STAR Reward System, a gamified, learner-centred intervention implemented among primary pupils at Sekolah Rendah Taman Rinting 1, Johor, Malaysia. Grounded in motivation theory and experiential learning principles, the system employs structured rewards to enhance student motivation and engagement. It was implemented using an action research approach to systematically improve ESL classroom practices while examining its effects on students' behaviour and learning outcomes.

Accordingly, the study aims to document the implementation of the A-STAR Reward System and evaluate its impact on pupils' motivation, engagement, and English proficiency.

2.4 Theory of Planned Behaviour

The underpinning theoretical framework for this research is augmented by the Theory of Planned Behaviour. The Theory of Planned Behaviour, developed by Ajzen, posits that an individual's behavior is determined by their intention to perform that behaviour. In turn, this intention is shaped by three key factors: attitude toward the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control. In an ESL context, TPB posits that students' decisions to engage in language learning activities are shaped by their beliefs about the outcomes of those actions, their perceptions of social pressure, and their confidence in their ability to succeed. In the context of this study, TPB elucidates how a gamification method called the A-STAR Reward Card's structured reward mechanisms positively influence students' attitudes toward ESL learning, shape classroom subjective norms to encourage English usage, and enhance their perceived behavioral control over language acquisition tasks (Duisenova & Zhorabekova, 2024; Sigalingging et al., 2023). Specifically, by providing tangible rewards and recognition for effort and achievement, the A-STAR Reward system may foster positive attitudes toward English, encourage peer support for language use, and build self-efficacy in language learning among underprivileged students (Malage & Watini, 2024).

3. METHODOLOGY: ACTION RESEARCH DESIGN

This study adopted an action research design following the Plan–Act–Observe– Reflect (PAOR) cycle.

3.1 Participants and Context

The participants were pupils from Year 1 to Year 6 at Sekolah Kebangsaan Taman Rinting 1 (SKTR1), Johor. The school serves a predominantly underprivileged community, where many pupils have limited exposure to English outside the classroom and demonstrate low academic confidence in ESL. The A Star Reward System intervention was conducted over approximately ten months during regular ESL lessons.

3.2 Action Research Cycles

This section outlines the iterative Plan-Act-Observe-Reflect action research methodology, which was employed to identify challenges, implement interventions, collect data, and reflect on improvements in pedagogical practices for the A-STAR Reward System in ESL instruction (Casanova-Mata, 2023).

3.2.1 Plan

The ‘Plan’ stage involved identifying learning issues such as low motivation, passive participation, reluctance to speak English, limited independent task completion, and minimal learning enthusiasm among underprivileged pupils, patterns typical in low-resource contexts without clear incentives (Duisenova & Zhorabekova, 2024; Hashim et al., 2025; Sigalingging et al., 2023; Malage & Watini, 2024). To address this, the A-STAR Reward System was introduced as a gamified loyalty-card approach in which pupils earned stars for task completion, participation, and effort, which could be redeemed for small rewards to enhance engagement and reinforce positive behaviour (Yunus & Tan, 2021). Clear criteria for earning stars ensured fairness, transparency, and alignment with learning objectives, in line with structured action research planning (Candrawati et al., 2024; Casanova-Mata, 2023; Fauzi et al., 2024).

3.2.2 Act

The ‘Act’ stage involved the systematic implementation of the A-STAR Reward System within the target ESL classrooms, where pupils were introduced to the reward card concept and the criteria for earning stars (Chai & Yunus, 2021; Gálvez & Campo, 2023). The A-STAR Reward System was implemented during regular ESL lessons. Teachers integrated the system that has a few facets into daily classroom activities, including vocabulary exercises, speaking tasks, reading comprehension, and short writing assignments, as shown Figure 1. Pupils were informed of the reward structure, expectations, and goals. Rewards were intentionally modest to ensure that motivation was driven by achievement rather than material value. Over time, the system was consistently applied to reinforce participation, effort, and improvement.

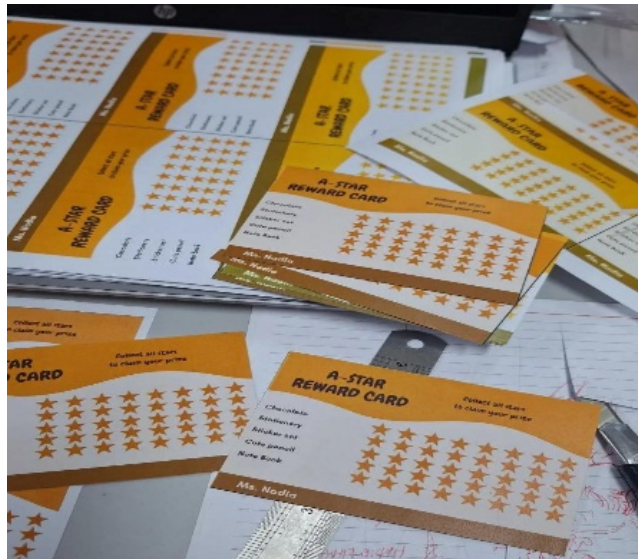


Figure 1. Facets of A-Star Reward Card

3.2.3 Observation

The 'Observe' stage involved systematic data collection on the implementation of the A-STAR Reward System and its impact on pupils' behaviour and engagement in the ESL classroom (Candrawati et al., 2024; Syawaludin et al., 2019). Observations were conducted throughout the intervention, with teachers documenting changes in behaviour, participation, and attitudes, alongside informal pupil feedback. Notably, pupils began initiating English use independently, such as writing short notes to teachers, an uncommon behaviour before the intervention, while classroom participation and task completion also improved. Quantitative data were obtained by comparing mid-term and final examination results, and significant improvements were seen, as shown in Figure 2. These pupil-written notes served as valuable artefacts, reflecting authentic student voice and providing a safe medium for expression (Zumrudiana & Alejandro, 2025).

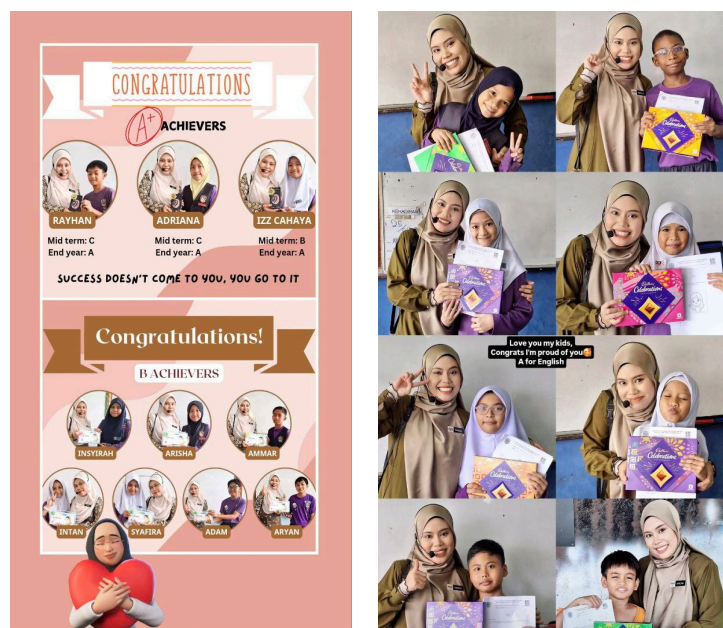


Figure 2. Students' Results Comparison from Mid-term to Year-end



Figure 3. Students' Workbook Completion

Figure 3 shows the strengthening of motivation through self-efficacy. With the A-Star Reward System, the teacher observed a marked increase in students' willingness to attempt challenging tasks, indicating a boost in their self-efficacy and a reduction in language anxiety during English lessons (S & Jayakodi, 2024). This aligns with the Theory of Planned Behaviour, where enhanced perceived behavioural control, fostered by consistent positive reinforcement, directly contributes to a greater willingness to engage in language learning behaviours.



Figure 4. Students 'Thank You' Cards to Teacher

The students also gave a 'Thank You' card, as shown in Figure 4. This unsolicited gesture demonstrates an enhanced level of student appreciation and connection, indicative of the positive

relational dynamics cultivated through the intervention (Bao et al., 2021; Maggioli, 2017).

There were also multiple students writing one-page note cards for the teacher. This artefact reflects a pupil's affective engagement, expressed through a decorated note thanking the teacher for support in writing. Emerging during the Act phase, it highlights the impact of socio-culturally responsive and caring feedback in fostering a safe and supportive classroom environment ((Zumrudiana & Alejandro, 2025). For underprivileged learners, such teacher-student rapport strengthens emotional connection and willingness to engage in learning (Hashim & Yusoff, 2021). This intrinsic motivation, cultivated through positive teacher-student relationships, provides a foundation for sustained engagement in language acquisition (Castro et al., 2020).

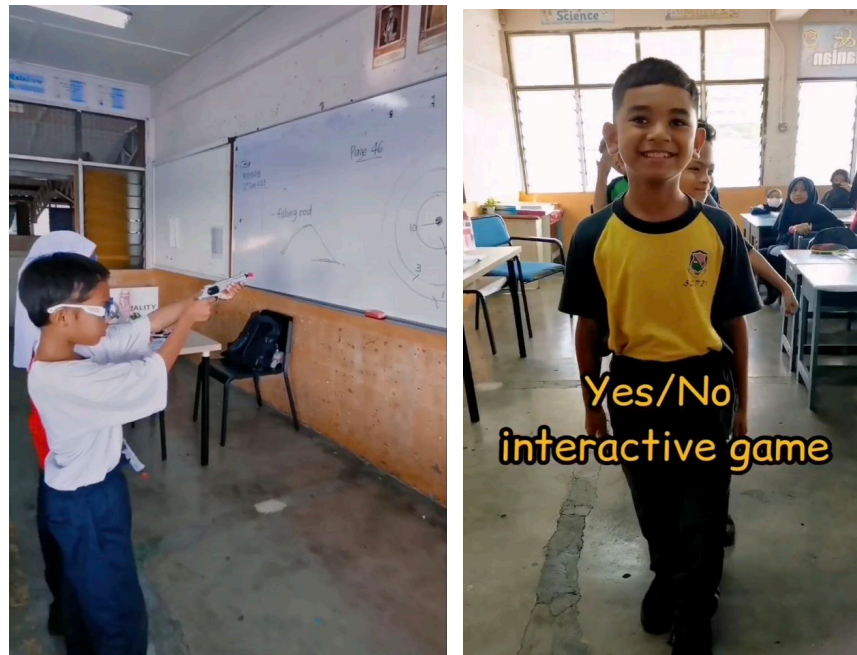


Figure 5. Students' Engagement in the Classroom

Figure 5 shows increased self-initiated use of English and active participation among the pupils. This indicates greater behavioural engagement, which boosts motivation and language acquisition. Supported by ongoing monitoring and tailored feedback, this engagement fosters perceptions of fair teaching and strengthens students' commitment to learning. It shifts students from simply being "on task" to "in task," showing deeper passion for challenging activities (Xu, 2024). Dialogic feedback also builds supportive teacher-student relationships and shared knowledge of assessment criteria, promoting active involvement and better outcomes (Hernández-Martínez, 2023; Tomasine, 2024). This change turns feedback into an interactive tool for growth, aligning with social constructivism, where students help shape their learning.

3.2.4 Reflection

The 'Reflect' stage involved a comprehensive review of the collected qualitative and quantitative data, including student artefacts and examination results, to critically assess the efficacy of the implemented gamified reward system. This study suggests a few learning points from the A-Star Reward system:

a. Strengthening Motivation through Self-Efficacy

Feedback directly impacts ESL students' motivation by helping them recognise their progress and competence. Firstly, reducing learning gaps occurs when constructive feedback enables learners to identify their strengths and weaknesses, thereby raising their awareness of the discrepancy between their current knowledge and intended learning goals (Fawzi & Mohamad, 2020). Secondly, inspiring low achievers is achieved when feedback demonstrates social and emotional support; as a result, students feel that their work has been carefully reviewed by the teacher, which enhances their motivation and persistence (Fawzi & Mohamad, 2020). Thirdly, building confidence is facilitated through positive and supportive feedback, which strengthens learners' self-efficacy; therefore, confident students become more motivated and engaged, as they believe in their ability to succeed (Darazi, 2023).

b. Enhancing Multi-Dimensional Engagement

Engagement in ESL is multifaceted, involving emotional, behavioural, and cognitive responses to the learning process (Jiang & Sukying, 2024). Firstly, emotional engagement is strengthened when supportive feedback creates a safe and inclusive classroom environment; consequently, underprivileged pupils feel emotionally secure despite external stressors, which encourages greater risk-taking in language learning (Callingham, 2016). Secondly, behavioural participation increases when frequent and timely feedback encourages active involvement in classroom activities; in particular, immediate responses promote higher participation rates and enhance language production during interactive tasks (Subramainan & Moamin, 2020; Altun & Khdir, 2022). Thirdly, cognitive development is enhanced as effective feedback guides students in refining their thinking and exploring ideas more independently; thus, learners transition from passive recipients of information to active self-correctors (Wahyudi et al., 2024).

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Improvement in English Language Performance

Comparison of mid-term and final examination results showed a general improvement in pupils' English performance. While progress varied among individuals, the overall trend indicated higher scores, improved task completion, and better comprehension.

These findings suggest that increased motivation and engagement contributed positively to learning outcomes. They concur with previous studies that highlight the direct correlation between enhanced motivation and academic achievement, particularly in language acquisition settings (Candrawati et al., 2024; Mazlan et al., 2023).

4.2 Increased Motivation and Engagement

Qualitative observations demonstrated a marked change in pupil behaviour. Pupils showed greater enthusiasm during ESL lessons, actively sought opportunities to earn stars, and displayed persistence in completing tasks. The act of writing voluntary English notes to teachers symbolised increased confidence, ownership of learning, and reduced fear of making mistakes. This transition from extrinsic motivators to more intrinsic engagement aligns with self-determination theory, where initial external rewards can scaffold internal drive when learning is perceived as valuable and mastery-oriented (Yacob et al., 2022). Furthermore, the gamified elements fostered a competitive yet collaborative environment, prompting students to engage more deeply with the English language and its practical applications (Hashim et al., 2025).

4.3 Pedagogical Implications

The findings support existing literature on the effectiveness of gamification and reward-based

motivation in ESL learning. More importantly, they highlight the value of simple, low-cost innovations that are sensitive to contextual constraints. By designing tasks that align with pupils' goals and interests, teachers can address both situational and long-term motivational (Johari et al., 2025). The action research approach enabled continuous adaptation, ensuring that the intervention remained relevant and effective. This iterative refinement process underscores the importance of flexible pedagogical strategies that can be tailored to specific learner needs, particularly within resources constrained.

5. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the A-STAR Reward System is an effective gamified intervention for enhancing motivation, engagement, and ESL performance among underprivileged pupils. Through the systematic application of the Plan-Act-Observe-Reflect action research cycle, meaningful improvements were observed in both learning behaviour and academic outcomes.

The findings affirm that structured rewards, when aligned with learning objectives and implemented consistently, can transform classroom dynamics and empower young ESL learners. The A-STAR Reward System offers a practical, scalable, and sustainable strategy for schools seeking to address motivational challenges in similar contexts.

Future research may explore longitudinal impacts, broader implementation across different school settings, and the transition from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation over time.

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