Testing the Improvement of Cultural Awareness and Expression Competence through Game-based Learning and Literature in EFL in Secondary Education

Evaluación de la mejora de la competencia en conciencia y expresión cultural mediante el aprendizaje basado en el juego y la literatura en ILE en educación secundaria

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Abstract

Keywords
Game-based learning (GBL);
key competence, cultural
awareness, and expression;
English as a Foreign Language
(EFL); literature; short
detective stories.

Introduction: This study investigates the potential enhancement of the key competency of cultural awareness and expression in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) by applying an integrated game-based learning (GBL) methodology combined with literature. **Methodology:** Utilizing a qualitative approach, a didactic sequence was implemented in a 3rd ESO class comprising 30 students. **Results and Discussion:** The findings indicate that GBL and literature can effectively foster key competencies and foundational EFL skills in an engaging and motivational manner. Despite the limited timeframe, students demonstrated an increased understanding of British culture and the short detective story subgenre while naturally expanding their vocabulary and grammatical skills. Additionally, the heightened motivation observed among students highlights the importance of active learning. **Conclusion:** The practical implications of this research are inspiring, offering valuable insights for educators and policymakers and motivating further studies in this area.

Resumen

Palabras clave
Aprendizaje basado en juegos
(ABJ); competencia clave en
conciencia y expresión cultural;
inglés como lengua extranjera
(ILE); literatura; género ficción
detectivesca.

Introducción: este estudio investiga la posible mejora de la competencia clave conciencia cultural y la expresión en inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) mediante la aplicación de una metodología integrada de aprendizaje basado en juegos (GBL) combinada con literatura. **Metodología:** utilizando un enfoque de método cualitativo, se implementó una secuencia didáctica en una clase de 3º ESO compuesta por 30 estudiantes. **Resultados y discusión:** los resultados indican que el GBL y la literatura pueden fomentar eficazmente competencias clave y destrezas básicas de EFL de forma atractiva y motivadora. A pesar del tiempo limitado, los estudiantes demostraron una mayor comprensión de la cultura británica y del subgénero de las novelas cortas de detectives, al mismo tiempo que ampliaban de forma natural su vocabulario y sus destrezas gramaticales. Además, la mayor motivación observada entre los estudiantes pone de relieve la importancia del aprendizaje activo. **Conclusiones:** la investigación ofrece valiosas perspectivas cualitativas y cuantitativas para futuros estudios en este campo.

1. Introducción

Cultural awareness and expression competence are increasingly crucial in our current society, given the expansion of multiculturalism and its growing presence in classes at all levels. It is now more vital than ever for learners to be aware of the cultural differences they might encounter to navigate this cultural diversity respectfully. The urgent need to address the lack of foreign cultural knowledge among students and their awareness of their culture has been a pressing issue in recent decades. This article is a response to this need, focusing on developing this key competence in the context of secondary school teaching, given its relevance today.

Even though this competence has gained weight throughout the years and the importance of its teaching cannot be denied, in practice, little is taught about culture in high schools in general and in the EFL Classroom in particular. In the best-case scenario, learners will acquire knowledge of British and American culture. There is a failure to fully exploit all the opportunities this competence offers us as teachers, such as the transversality that is required in the current educational law (LOMLOE) in Spain's curriculum between different subjects, taking advantage of cultural awareness and expression competence, subjects such as History and English can be linked. Thanks to our teaching experience, we discovered that this competence can be developed in the EFL Classroom. The contents teachers include in their learning situations are of great importance, as is how they teach them. The new LOMLOE curriculum asks teachers to hand over their central role as class directors to their students, who must become active learners in the teaching context. Therefore, implementing active methods and methodologies becomes crucial to accomplish this LOMLOE goal. One of those active methodologies is Game-Based Learning. According to a study by Papastergiou (2009),

learners' motivation increases thanks to using digital games in the learning context. As teachers, we could observe that children and teenagers showed higher motivation when learning through games than when facing a traditional class.

As cultural knowledge can be easily associated with adolescent boredom, the choice of a Game-Based Learning (GBL) methodology was purposeful. Even though this methodology has been used multiple times and cannot be considered "innovative," many others, including digital games and TICS, might bring the innovative aspect that this methodology may lack, and even the appealing learners may require to be fully engaged. In turn, including literature in the didactic proposal created for this research meets the usefulness of literature regarding both the language in use and cultural competence. The cultural sphere that emanates from literature seems obvious, as literary texts are filled with cultural components. As McKay (2001) claimed, vocabulary and grammar knowledge can be enhanced using literary texts due to the realness that derives from them. In literary texts, grammar structures are used in a context, not in prefabricated activities that aim only to get learners to repeat structures. As the LOMLOE curriculum demands examples connected to the real world when designing learning situations, applying literature could be a very beneficial tool to achieve this.

Thus, this article aims to prove whether cultural awareness and expression key competence could be improved by applying a Digital Game-Based Learning methodology and using literary texts and literature knowledge, specifically, the detective short stories subgenre. This subgenre was chosen as it was included in the syllabus of the English subject. The didactic sequence designed and developed for this research was focused on answering the research question that guides the present work: Can the key competence of cultural

> **This article aims to prove whether cultural awareness and expression key competence could be improved by applying a Digital Game-Based Learning methodology and using literary texts and literature knowledge.**

awareness and expression be improved in the EFL classroom using Game-Based Learning and literature in an integrated way?

To answer this question, three main objectives were established: (1) To use GBL and gamification to teach literature and basic English knowledge in the EFL class, (2) To prove if literature may be the vehicle for improving cultural awareness and expression key competence and EFL basic knowledge in a synergic way, (3) To improve students' perception regarding their motivation and engagement through GBL in the EFL class.

The didactic sequence was created, proposed, and implemented in an EFL class of 3rd ESO, developed through six sessions. This article might become helpful in further research as there is little information on the development of cultural awareness and expression of key competence in the context of EFL classrooms.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Game-Based Learning and Gamification in Education

Several studies have investigated the effects of applying a Game-Based Learning methodology in the EFL Classroom. Although this methodology has not been seen as an innovative tool in the teaching atmosphere, the demands of the new educational Spanish curriculum, LOMLOE (Real Decreto 217/2022), call for a revival and revitalization of this active methodology.

As a baseline, it is essential to state the definition of the Game-Based Learning methodology (GBL), as it is usually confused with Gamification (Márquez-Gómez & Alcantud-Díaz, 2019). The Laureate Network Office (Johnson, n.d.) explained that "game-based learning is a smaller effort where individual games or technology are used to enhance a particular learning experience." (p. 2). Countless games can be used in an academic context to develop the learning process, including digital and video games and traditional and modern board games, such as Monopoly, Minecraft, Dobble, and Scrabble (Isaacs, 2015). However, it is not as simple as choosing and implementing any game in a class; to meet the learning goals, the game must include instructions, a defined process, and an outcome (Johnson, n.d.). Therefore, in the Game-Based Learning methodology, as seen in Figure 1 below, we must consider four parameters: the game's characteristics, the learning outcomes we want learners to obtain, the content we will include, and the assessments needed in the game. Once these four features have been selected, we have efficiently designed a game with academic input and outcomes appropriate for classroom implementation.

Conversely, Gamification differs from GBL in that it adds "game-like elements into your course […]. Typical strategies used involve recognizing achievements through points, badges, and leaderboards or progress boards." (Johnson, n.d., p. 1). Thus, games are not included in the learning process, but some fundamentals typical of games in the classroom environment, such as badges, points, or competitions (Márquez-Gómez & Alcantud-Díaz, 2019).

Despite being two different methodologies, it is not unusual to see how they are implemented simultaneously, as including games in the EFL class might also promote using a leaderboard or points. However, traditionally, it has been thought that GBL teaching would be a more appropriate methodology for pre-elementary and elementary school environments (Johnston et al., 2023; Vygotsky, 1966). Nonetheless, several studies have confirmed the effectiveness of applying a GBL methodology concerning the acquired knowledge of high school students (Johnston et al., 2023), such as the study by Papastergiou (2009). In this study, it was confirmed that using a digital game increased both the students' motivation through the learning process and the success of the acquirement process of the concepts, in this case, computer memory concepts. Nevertheless, this claim can also be extrapolated to using more traditional games, such as board games. Recio (2007) champions the actual stimulation of several abilities through board games and the importance of said abilities in our current society, as the ones "that are stimulated by games are among the most important ones an educational system might aspire to inter and intrapersonal abilities, to achieve a respectful and understanding relationship with others." (Recio, 2007, p. 3).

Even though these mentioned abilities are imperative should citizenship competence be developed and encouraged in the EFL classroom, board games can provide a list of abilities concerning different perspectives: Students, when playing, might improve their mental acumen and concentration. Board games have developed problem-solving abilities, as it has also been learners' autonomy and social abilities (Recio, 2007). Chou's (2017) research provides additional evidence concerning the development of technically non-academic abilities through GBL in class, as the researcher also highlights the diverse benefits that might be provided by board games, taking Monopoly as an example.

Not only have games proved useful for acquiring academic concepts (Papastergiou, 2009), but they have also shown their high value in developing what nowadays is called key and specific competencies (Recio, 2007). On the one hand, Mikasyte (2018) reviewed some studies carried out concerning the use of GBL in the EFL class and found evidence that showed that learners' knowledge and language skills, understood as the current specific competencies such as oral comprehension competence, improved thanks to the use of educational games, which might confirm the effectiveness of the GBL methodology. Moreover, when teachers apply GBL, particularly EFL teachers, they might find a resourceful tool to help them face one of the main issues of our current society: the apathy shown by many students and the decrease in concentration levels (Getahun, 2022; Pinar-Pérez et al., 2021). The last generations of young students from developed countries have shown a decrease in their ability to focus on something for more than a short period (George et al., 2023; Jargon, 2022). APPS such as TikTok or Instagram, which provide audiovisual content in a one-minute-long video format, have profoundly influenced young people's focus span. Evidence also shows

Figure 1. *GBL Model*
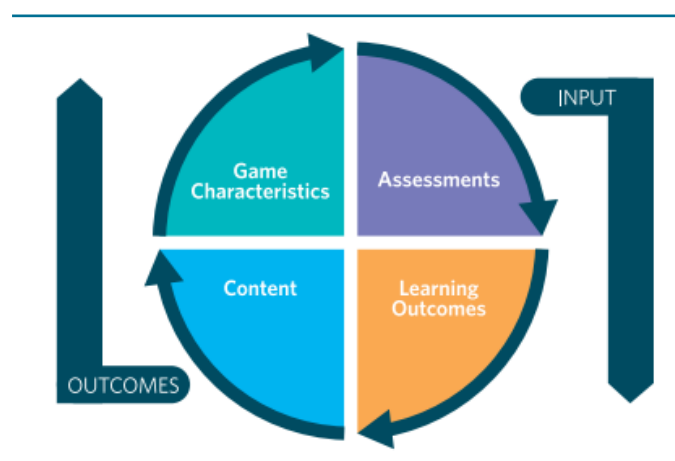
Source: Johnson (n.d.).

that the constant gratification provided by the consumption of this kind of short video makes it harder for young people to keep focused when doing activities that do not provide said gratification (George et al., 2023; Jargon, 2022).

Introducing GBL and gamification in the EFL classroom might mitigate these consequences. As Ghazal and Singh (2016) explain, games "with difficult but achievable challenges capture the imagination of learners and keep them engaged for sustained periods" (p. 4). Well-designed Game-Based Learning and Gamification methodologies have proved to increase both motivation among students (Ghazal & Singh, 2016) and their knowledge and language skills (Mikasyte, 2018). Colby (2017) states that games "provide richly multimodal spaces that incorporate visual, aural, written, spatial, and kinesthetic modes that students can then analyze and explore." (p. 55). Márquez-Gómez and Alcantud-Díaz (2019) emphasized the existence of reading and interpreting requirements through (educational) games and the fact that there is a symbiosis between literary texts. Including literature in games would amplify the benefits regarding production and comprehension competencies.

2.2 Literature in the EFL Classroom as a Teaching Tool

Literature was one of the key "sources of input for teaching in language classes in the era of Grammar Translation Method, but since then, it has been dropped down the pedestal," as Khatib, Rezaei, and Derakhshan (2011, p. 1) explained. De Caleya Dalmau et al. (2012) also attributed the decline of the use of literature in the EFL classroom to the literature-based methods deficiency since, regrettably, "starting from the middle of the 20th century, there has been a consistent rejection of using literature in the language classroom partially provoked by inadequacies of traditional literature-based methods" (De Caleya Dalmau et al., 2012, p. 218). These authors also highlighted that "a change is needed to re-establish literature in the foreign-language curriculum in Spain" (De Caleya Dalmau et al., 2012, p. 219).

Cultural awareness and expression competence is one of the key competencies addressed by the LOMLOE curriculum that pursues the acquirement of cultural knowledge by learners in a respectful way regarding cultural differences that can be found during the expression of ideas, feelings, and emotions through a wide variety of artistic display (Real Decreto 217/2022), it seems that literature would be a very pertinent and valuable tool to be used in the EFL classroom to foster. Additionally, literary texts have proved helpful in explaining the basic knowledge that students must acquire during their academic development (García Vaquero & Alcantud-Díaz, 2023). Although literary texts might detract from the pleasure of reading (Gower, 1986), several studies have proved its benefits are rich and varied. Khatib et al. (2011) claim that authenticity can be easily extracted from these works due to the nature of literary texts such as novels. Regardless of the genre, real-life situations and authentic communicative interactions can be found in a literary work. When reading, learners are exposed to language in use and contextualized, and they might even infer constructions and learn how registers function.

Additionally, in this era, globalization has brought rising concern for general needs instead of individual needs. Given that literature covers various topics, it provides a wide range of resources for EFL classes. In turn, De Caleya Dalmau et al. (2012) agree with this perspective of literature's efficacy in improving or developing cultural competence since "for all students, literature is an

ideal vehicle for illustrating language use and for introducing cultural assumptions" (De Caleya Dalmau et al., 2012, p. 20). Moreover, the more learners read, the more exposed they are to new terms and topics unknown to them until that moment, and therefore, their vocabulary grounding will inevitably enlarge. This same principle can be extrapolated to grammatical knowledge since "literary texts are the major sources where complex structures such as dangling structure, inversion, subjunctives, etc. occur." (Khatib et al., 2011, p. 202).

Nevertheless, De Caleya et al. (2012) elaborated a list of obstacles Spanish teachers might face when trying to teach EFL through literature, as "those can be lack of preparation in the area of literature teaching in TEFL; absence of clear-cut objectives defining the role of literature in EFL; absence of the background and training in literature, and, finally, lack of pedagogically-designed appropriate materials that can be used by language teachers in a classroom con-text" (De Caleya Dalmau et al., 2012, p. 219). Another issue to be considered is the loathing young learners feel towards reading in general terms. Each year, the Spanish FGEE (Federation of Publishers' Guilds of Spain) elaborates a report concerning the reading habits of the Spaniard society, focusing on the statistics retrieved from children and adolescents reading habits in the 2022 report, it is stated that:

A drop can be observed among teenagers ages 15-18 compared to last year's report, matching 2019 results. (FGEE, 2022;12-13).

This is not an unknown situation to those who spend time with teenagers. Nowadays, many adolescents see reading a book as a dull and uninspiring activity that does not offer them any instant entertainment, unlike their mobile phones. It takes time to read a book and be engaged by the plot, something TikTok videos achieve in seconds. Hilt

"For all students, literature is an ideal vehicle for illustrating language use and for introducing cultural assumptions".

(2019) connects a decrease in the quality of users' reading habits to the excessive use of mobile phones, and thus, there is also a decrease in their academic level. When a foreign language is added to the mix, this apathy to reading only worsens; as they read in a foreign language, they do not master it. Even though including literature in the EFL Classroom might initially seem to be a challenging goal, several studies have proven that introducing a GBL methodology might help increase learners' implication and motivation in class. A case in point is Maroudi's study, which introduced YA novels to a group of teenagers through digital tools. Maroudi concludes that students enjoyed both activities and seemed engaged in the game, and learners gave more than positive feedback.

2.3 Cultural Awareness and Expression Competence in the EFL Classroom

The new LOMLOE curriculum pleads for the development and fostering of eight key competencies:

- Linguistic communicative competence.
- Plurilingual competence.
- STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Maths) competence.
- Digital competence.

- Personal, social, learning to learn competence.
- Citizenship competence.
- Entrepreneur competence.
- Cultural awareness and expression competence.

Fostering this last competence is understood as the fact that learners must comprehend and respect how ideas, opinions, feelings, and emotions are expressed and communicated in a creative way in different cultures and through a vast range of artistic and cultural manifestations (LOMLOE, 2022), is essential these days. Cross-cultural experiences could help students to be prepared to face current challenges most respectfully. As Eden et al. (2024) put it, "in an increasingly interconnected and diverse world, it is essential to prepare students to be responsible global citizens who can navigate cultural differences, communicate effectively across borders, and collaborate with individuals from diverse backgrounds" (Eden et al., 2014, p. 6). Some researchers have offered some insight concerning the practical development of cultural awareness and expression competence in the classroom. For example, McKay (2001) highlighted how using literature texts in class might efficiently contribute to developing cultural competence. Eden et al. (2024) agreed with the usefulness of literature in class to develop cultural competence, among other resources such as articles and audiovisual materials, if teachers select materials to which the diversity of their students could relate.

In the context of the USA classrooms, Ford et al. (2014) reckoned the need to address the cultural differences among learners in the educative context to prevent school failure. Considering these divergences when preparing the academic content of the sessions, cultural awareness and expression competence could also be developed indirectly, as teachers would be encouraged to include materials from various backgrounds and, therefore, would broaden their students' cultural heritage. In turn, Vromans et al. (2023) employ the term "intercultural competence," which is defined as "behaving and communicating effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (Deardorff, 2006, as cited in Vromans et al., 2023, p. 2). Therefore, this intercultural competence can be linked to cultural awareness and expression competence regarding the importance of cultural knowledge in the present academic (and worldwide) context.

In addition, Vromans et al. (2023) stressed the relevance of the dissonance produced by the learner's previous knowledge or preconceived ideas in contrast to the new knowledge or point of view offered by the teacher. Without this dissonance, they affirm that transformational learning would never take place. Therefore, teachers who want to foster cultural competence among their learners might look for the creation of this dissonance through active methodologies that spark their interest. Finally, Kourova and Modianos (2013) connected the act of learning a foreign language to their (own) cultural awareness through a partnership called the "Connecting Classrooms Project," in which students from Russia (learning English) and America (learning Russian) collaborate and interact with each other. It is explained in the research that "together they work on projects that increase their understanding of the language and culture of the target language and so, build a richer appreciation of their own culture." (Kourova & Modianos, 2013, p. 60). Practical research like this one is not easily found, and its results are of great value in developing new forms to include the teaching of cultural awareness and expression competence in foreign language classes.

3. Methodology

3.1 Context and design

The proposal of the designed didactic sequence was implemented in a semiprivate school. With its unique learning and teaching philosophy of project-based learning, the school stands out from other educational centers. The students who attend this high school generally belong to the upper middle class socially and economically. There is only one group per school year, and the student body in each class is somewhere between twenty-five and thirty. Students are usually arranged in groups of four, combining students with different levels of abilities. These students show a high knowledge of the English language and its culture. The school promotes acquiring knowledge mentioned in English, Spanish, Catalan, and French. Students' learning process includes classes focused on society and culture, literature, and even translation from and to the foreign language taught, without forgetting grammatical and vocabulary content or developing specific skills such as oral and reading comprehension and key competencies. The school's individualized approach ensures that students can thrive in their learning journey regardless of their abilities.

The didactic sequence created to meet the objectives of the present article required six sessions laid out in two weeks. Most sessions took place in the EFL classroom, although one was implemented in the school gym as the activity design required some physical activity. In this class, there was just one student with a significant curricular adaptation due to different conditions, which made their academic development slower than that of their classmates. Nonetheless, as the didactic sequence was designed to be performed in groups, the activities they were given were all but one the same as their classmates. This specific activity was adapted so they could acquire the same knowledge as their classmates.

3.2 Didactic sequence intervention

Participants

The didactic sequence was implemented in the 3rd ESO class, a group of thirty students between fourteen and fifteen years old. The class was divided into eight groups, six of which comprised four students and the other two groups of three students with different levels of abilities.

Main objectives

The research question that sets the present research is: Can cultural awareness and expression, a key competence, be improved in the EFL classroom using GBL and literature in an integrated way? As mentioned in the introduction, three main objectives were established to answer this question.

Regarding the basic knowledge of the EFL they worked on during this didactic sequence, students acquired and reviewed contents related to the use of modal verbs, functional English, vocabulary linked to detective short stories, and the discursive content and structure of the detective short stories. The key competencies worked on in class were cultural awareness and expression competence, as the whole content of the didactic sequence revolved around Anglo-Saxon culture and digital competence because many of the activities designed were to be done using a digital device. Communicative competence has also been worked along this didactic proposal, as students have been exposed to oral and written exchanges.

Methodological and legal justification

According to the new LOMLOE curricula design, one of the ultimate goals of the EFL subject should be teaching the contents through a communicative approach in which the students work as active agents. The focus is put on the students by using the GBL methodology to design the didactic sequence completely. It enables them to acquire knowledge autonomously while developing collaborative work (Chou, 2017), and therefore, they make good use of their communicative skills (McKay, 2001). Furthermore, the choice of developing cultural awareness and expression competence was taken because of the analysis of the center made during the first weeks of the internship period. The didactic sequence was designed using the current educational Decree 217/2022.

Materials

Different materials had to be created to implement the designed didactic sequence. Several strategies were observed, the most remarkable one being an individualized handout. Once learners arrived at class with their individualized handouts, they knew the activities and objectives that must be accomplished that day and throughout the weeks. This strategy improves students' autonomous work and may also avoid losing valuable time at the beginning of each class.

A list of the materials used by the researcher can be found below in Table 1.

Table 1. *List of materials*

Material	Type of activity	Description	Objective
Explanatory Dossier.	Individual.	Individual handouts are given to each student, and the whole didactic sequence is arranged daily.	Students know which activities they will carry out every day and have a brief explanation of each.
Poster of rules To learn how to collaborate to set some rules, they must follow.	Group activity.	Poster designed to be fulfilled orally by students with the rules they were going to follow through all the games.	To review modal verbs and their use.
Online game Snakes and Ladders (Visit it here: Snakes and Ladders: Detective Subgenre Edition.	Groups (the members of the same group compete against each other).	An online game designed using templates from the Genial.ly app (https://genially.com/es/), imitating the game of Snakes and Ladders. The game included theoretical content regarding the detective short stories subgenre. The game's content was extracted from the book Detective Stories: Arthur Conan Doyle et al. (Bertinetti, 1995) and from Emily Martin's article A Brief History of Detective Fiction (https://www.novelsuspects.com/articles/a-brief-history-of-detective-fiction/).	To test students' written comprehension, as well as their previous knowledge. To check if students could learn about literature through an online board game.

Material	Type of activity	Description	Objective
Cards (Memory Game).	By groups (the members of the same group compete against each other).	A traditional memory game created by the researcher, in which students had to pair the author's card with the detective they created and the title of one of their books. The titles of the books were coded.	To widen students' cultural knowledge linked to literature works, including both male and female writers To foster deductive thinking.
Online game (Escape Room: Discover the British World).	By groups (groups compete against each other).	Escape Room was created using a template from the Genial.ly app. Students had to guess the riddles (created by the researcher), considering that all the answers were related to important English features and vocabulary linked to the subgenre of the short detective stories. Once they had completed the escape room, they had a secondary mission: Who killed the victim in *Silver Blaze*, a short story by Arthur Conan Doyle? (1982). They received an abridged version so they could solve the mystery In this case, an adapted version of the game (see here) was created. They joined their group again for the last riddle and the secondary mission.	To widen students' cultural knowledge, emphasizing the English world and the vocabulary connected to the short detective stories subgenre. To foster critical thinking, imagination, and deductive skills. To check students' written comprehension. To learn about the structure and main characteristics of the short detective stories subgenre in a deductive way.
Kahoot *(Fact of Cap).*	By groups (groups compete against each other).	Kahoot game (https://kahoot.com/). It contained a quiz on True or False 20 questions. Content regarding grammar, vocabulary, cultural knowledge, short detective stories theory, and origins were included. Some of the answers have been worked on in class, but some were created intentionally to be unknown by the class.	To review their knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, short detective story content, and cultural knowledge. To widen students' knowledge in all the items mentioned above.
Questions *(Steal the Bacon).*	By groups (groups compete against each other).	It is the famous game "Steal the Bacon," but it has questions regarding the content worked on in the previous sessions and some new content.	To check oral comprehension. To check and review cultural, grammar, and vocabulary knowledge.

Source: Own design.

Table 2. *Schedule of the implementation*

Session	Activities performed
1	Presentation of the didactic sequence Brief explanation of the activities that would be performed in the succeeding sessions Collaborative creation of the poster of rules Review of modal verbs
2	Online Game. Snakes and Ladders Game. Memory card
3	Online Game. Escape Room: Discover the British World Secondary Mission. Escape Room. Kahoot. Fact or Cap
4	Physical game. Steal the Bacon
5 and 6	Application activity. Written expression

Implementation of the didactic proposal

To successfully complete the entire designed didactic sequence, a schedule was arranged to consider the number of sessions available and the dates offered by the internship tutor (see Table 2 above).

3.3 Description of the implementation.

First session

As a start, the individualized dossiers were handed. Then, the explanation of how the classes would be started and the main objective of the didactic proposal took place to verify whether cultural awareness and expression could be improved through GBL and literature working synergically. Students were explained that, from that moment on, they would work in groups and were asked to come up with a name for their group related to the short detective stories subgenre they had seen in class. Then, the researcher focused on reviewing the use and form of modal verbs, asking students which

modal they would use in different contexts and how they would form it. The class then proceeded to create the poster of rules, which students established, knowing they had to follow not to be penalized during the subsequent sessions.

Second session

The second session began with an explanation of how the game Snakes and Ladders worked. Each of the groups had a laptop, and in this case, the members of each group competed against each other. They started to play, and meanwhile, the researcher wandered around the classroom to observe them working and taking mental notes for the informal assessment. Afterward, students were asked to stop playing and to turn off the laptops. It was time to start with the memory card game. Again, in groups, students were told to pair up the author with their main detective and one of their works and decode the latter's name.

Third session

For the third session, participants had to work together as a group by using a computer to be the first group to complete the escape room

and win some points. This session gave points depending on how early the escape room was completed. Students commenced playing and passing the different levels of the escape room. Once the first group had finished the escape room, they received 10 points and passed to solve the secondary mission. They were given the key points of one of Arthur Conan Doyle's short stories, Silver Blaze (1892), and they had to think and solve who the victim's murderer was. Then, the Kahoot activity included true or false questions. Participants had to answer as a group; consequently, they had to discuss and decide the answer cooperatively.

Fourth session

The EFL class was moved to the school gymnasium in the fourth session since the researchers wanted to work with a variation of the game "Steal the Bacon." Each group faced the researcher, who was holding a scarf they had to catch, and the members of the two competing groups were placed in a straight line. Each group member was given a number (shared with a member of the other group), and when their number was shouted, they had to run and try to be the ones catching the scarf and getting back safely to their team. If they achieved to do so, they won the opportunity to answer the question asked. If they answered correctly, they won a point. If not, their rival could answer and win the match. The rest of the class had to wait for their turn, but they were warned that any of the questions already asked could be repeated anytime. Therefore, they had to pay close attention to their classmates' performance.

Fifth and Sixth session

Both these sessions were used to give students time to write their final project. The final project was a written production that they made using any resources they might need. They had to think about a plot

that could be included in the short detective stories subgenre. Nevertheless, instead of writing the whole story, they had to come up with an ending that included a summary of the plot, who the actual culprit was, and how the detective solved the case. To help them understand what they were asked to do, the rubric the researcher would follow when correcting their writings was projected.

Strategies for data collection and its evaluation

A mainly qualitative research method was used. Several strategies were used to collect data from applying the designed didactic sequence and evaluate whether the research question and its objectives have been accomplished.

Evaluation of the implementation

The implementation of the didactic sequence was evaluated mainly through an informal assessment through direct observation, an informal evaluation tool, and keeping a voice record of my impressions of the sessions. A voice message at the end of each session was recorded to reflect on what had been noticed during the class. While doing the direct observation, the researchers considered the different levels of abilities in which the students were divided and how well-developed the collaborative work was in each group. In addition, the motivation shown by the students while learning new concepts or reviewing old ones was also noted.

Evaluation of the learning outcome through rubrics

Two evaluation tools were used to assess whether the learning objectives were accomplished at the end of the didactic sequence's implementation: a rubric designed to evaluate the students' final projects and a post-ques-

tionnaire designed to assess the participants' perception and their self-perception of the acquisition of knowledge they thought they had reached.

Firstly, a rubric was designed to evaluate the written productions that students were asked to do (with a minimum of 150 words and no maximum). To design it, the researcher considered several factors apart from the spelling and grammar corrections:

- The correct use of connectors to achieve a high level of cohesion in their narrative essays and the cohesion in their stories. They were asked to follow the structure or fundamental characteristics of the short detective stories subgenre as much as possible.
- The inclusion of any cultural knowledge they might have acquired during the previous sessions.
- Their creativity.
- The inclusion of new vocabulary learned through the sessions and the correct use of modal verbs.

Secondly, the creation of the post-questionnaire aimed to obtain as much information as possible regarding the value or usefulness of the didactic sequence, this time from the student's point of view. The class was asked about their opinion of the sessions regarding the increase of their cultural knowledge, the improvement of their EFL fluency and acquisition, their motivation when learning in class through GBL and gamification, together with literature, and their assessment of the didactic sequence proposed.

Teacher's self-evaluation

Finally, the researcher conducted a self-evaluation process of the didactic sequence implementation and chose a SWOT (Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, and Threat) analysis. Soler Pardo, and Alcantud Díaz (2020) briefly defined a SWOT analysis as "a framework

used to identify and analyze the internal and external causes that could have an impact on the viability of a project" (Soler Pardo & Alcantud Díaz, 2020, p. 117). This final assessment is of great value, especially the opportunities for improvement that this critical reflection could bring to my professional future. As a teacher, it is essential always to question yourself and self-evaluate your proposals and sessions, and being critical of your work is crucial.

4. Results and discusión

4.1. Assessment of the implementation

The didactic sequence's implementation was evaluated mainly through direct observation during each session. The vast majority of the students agreed on the efficiency of the GBL and gamification methodologies to help them acquire new knowledge more efficiently, and it was shown during the development of the didactic sequence. These results are consistent with those of Mikasyte (2018), who stated in her research that students' competencies improved thanks to the implementation of educational games in the teaching process. I could observe a betterment in students' reading skills and cultural background concerning the Anglo-Saxon culture and the subgenre of short detective stories.

A recurrent opinion was expressed among the students: playing games made the learning experience funnier and less tedious, and the competitive feature added to the games was a key factor in their learning motivation. There was a significantly positive result regarding a group of students who used to show little interest during the EFL classes. Nevertheless, they surprisingly showed a good attitude towards the games and the didactic sequence as early as the first session of the implementation, and they actively participated in the

games. Papastergiou (2009) stated that digital games helped increase students' motivation in the learning process, a fact proved during this didactic sequence.

The attitude shown by one of the most troublesome students in the class should be highlighted, as he completed the final writing task all by himself. His behavior during the last two sessions was not appropriate, and he was told to separate himself from his teammates and was asked to do the writing task alone. Interestingly, instead of not writing a word, the student completed the task and showed excitement, as he could creatively express himself and his ideas. A possible explanation might be that students tend to be willing to complete a writing task when they are offered the possibility of letting their imagination run riot.

According to these results, allowing students to write literary texts allows them to explore and exploit their creativity. Thus, their sense of motivation increases as few limitations are included. Therefore, including literary texts as examples is of great value regarding vocabulary acquisition and matches the conclusions stated by Reyes-Torres et al. (2014) regarding the usefulness of literary works as a vocabulary-expanding mechanism. As Constructivism (Xyst, 2016) states, an active learner will acquire new knowledge more deeply and in a more efficient way than a passive learner, and including or increasing students' enjoyment during the learning process facilitates the acquisition of content. Therefore, using digital and traditional games makes students the main characters of the learning process, increasing their participation and promoting students' engagement and enjoyment during classes. This notion translates to them focusing more during the process and, thus, being more aware of what they are being explained or taught, which will probably improve the knowledge acquisition process. The direct observation tool has been highly advantageous when assessing

> **The students tend to be willing to complete a writing task when they are offered the possibility of letting their imagination run riot.**

the real-time sessions. Through the sequence of classes, subtle changes in how explanations were made could be made, considering the previous experience observed.

4.2. Assessment of the achievement of learning objectives

Post Questionnaire

On the last day of the internship, a post questionnaire created through Google Forms was sent to the students to gather information concerning their opinion towards the didactic sequence in which they had participated and whether they perceived their EFL basic knowledge had increased throughout the sessions. Even though the survey was sent to the thirty students who belonged to the class, only fifteen students answered it. It was the last day of classes before the Eastern holidays; hence, students have not seen me again since then, which might have caused them to ignore the survey altogether.

Nonetheless, 100 % of the fifteen participants who answered the form agreed that, after the six sessions of the didactic sequence, they knew more about the short detective stories subgenre (see Graphic 1 below). Being asked to name two short detective stories writers, nearly the entirety of the participants could accomplish the task successfully (fourteen of them), being Agatha Christie and Arthur

Conan Doyle the most repeated names (see Figure 2 below), even though they were offered a variety of examples of writers in one of the games.

To the question concerning the cultural knowledge acquired through the didactic sequence, a common view amongst interviewees was that they had learned something new about English culture and its heritage. They offered several examples proving they had listened and paid attention during the classes. Although some of the examples mentioned easy-to-recall facts, some focused on notions they had discovered during the sessions.

Graphic 1. *Answers concerning English short detective stories*

Do you think you know more now about English detective fiction?
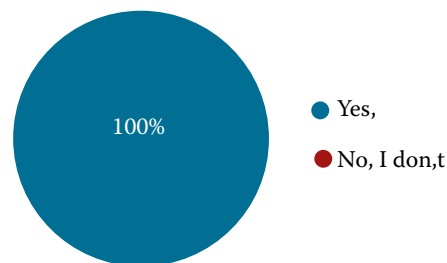
15 respuestas

100% ● Yes,

● No, I don,t

Figure 2. *Names of detective fiction writers given by students*

Can you name two detective fiction authors, a man and a woman

15 repuestas

Arthur Conan Doyle Agatha Christie
Conan Doyle y Agatha Cristie
Agatha Christie Arthur Conan Doyle
rthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie
Agatha Christie anda Arthur Conan Doyle
Agatha Christie and Poe
No
Agatha Christie and Arthur Connan Doyle.

Linked to their sense of cultural learning, they were asked whether playing games made learning new English vocabulary, grammar and cultural knowledge easier. Fifteen out of fifteen participants answered this question in the affirmative. Some interviewees argued that their attention levels increased when enjoying the classes, and this connects to the statement made by Ghazal and Singh (2016) highlighting the connection between games and learners' attention. One interviewee considered that playing the games in groups offered them an opportunity to learn how to work as a team, an interpersonal ability, which links to Recio's (2007) inter and intra-personal abilities developed by using games in class as a teaching tool. Overall (not only through the survey but when asked during the sessions), participants agreed that they learn more whenever they enjoy and have fun, which translates to them being active learners. As one participant put it, learners might remember better the silly mistakes they make when playing, as they fail and do not want to fail again and end up losing the game. A possible explanation for this result may be the competition factor, which tends to be instilled in people from an early age.

4.3 Evaluation of the learning outcome through rubrics

The second tool used to evaluate the accomplishment of the learning objectives was a rubric. For the final project, students had to create a writing per group, introducing some cultural knowledge learned during the sessions and characteristics typical of the short detective stories subgenre. Nine writings were delivered at the end of the last sessions. In general, most of the groups achieved to include cultural elements learned during the sessions of the didactic sequence in their writings, even though a vast majority of them chose the same one, the River

Thames, to set their murder. A possible explanation for this may be that this river was the solution for one of the riddles of the escape room, and through direct observation, It was noticed that it was the hardest one to figure out. Hence, the name of the river was stuck in their heads, and almost all of them used it for the background of the story, even though some of them also included other locations. This seems to confirm the results of Papastergiou's research (2009) regarding the efficiency of games in students' learning process. Interestingly, three of the groups did not include any cultural item in their writings.

On the contrary, the most striking result to emerge from the data is that several writings did not include any modal verb reviewed in class. Even though the word count was not a limitation, and they even had a lot of freedom concerning the plot and development of their story, some of them failed to find a way to include a modal verb in their texts. It is possible that the didactic sequence had failed to address the acquisition of the modal verb uses and structures. There is a considerable difference between the accomplishment of the inclusion of modal verbs and that of the creative factor. On average, all the groups showed great imagination and creativity when writing their stories. At the same time, they applied their newly acquired knowledge concerning the subgenre of short detective stories.

In most of the writings, the clues and information that led the detectives to solve the

Figure 3. *Example of one of the final projects created by learners*

mystery were innovative, and, in some cases, the characters show some of the typical traits of those in the detective stories. An example of this can be seen in Figure 3 below: learners stated that, even though there were clues that cast doubts on who the real murderer was, policemen insisted on the first suspect being the culprit, whereas the detective wanted to investigate the case deeply, as it usually happens in short detective stories.

It is also interesting to highlight the enrichment of the vocabulary used by all the groups. They successfully introduced the detective argot seen in class. These results are likely to be related to the inclusion of this literary vocabulary in the games played in class and on the secondary mission of the escape room. A strong relationship between literary texts and the acquisition of EFL basic knowledge, such as vocabulary, has been reported in the literature (García Vaquero & Alcantud Díaz, 2023). Together, these results provide important insights into the efficiency of including games and literary texts in the EFL classroom in the acquisition and development of cultural awareness and expression competence as well as EFL basic knowledge.

4.4 Teacher's self-assessment

A SWOT analysis was used to evaluate the implemented didactic sequence and, therefore, identify its strengths, opportunities, weaknesses, and threats. Figure 4 below shows a visual overview of these four aspects that were found after a thorough analysis of the designed implementation. This didactic sequence offers a variety of strengths that have been found during the analysis, being, the most unique one the existence of an explanatory handout in which a summary of all the sessions, deadlines and activities to perform was included. This handout is one of the working procedures of the center in which the didactic sequence was implemented, and I found it of

such great value that I wanted to include it in the sequence. Students are not only English learners; they are young human beings growing up and maturing, and by giving them this handout, some adult skills might start to be acquired. Knowing beforehand what they are expected to do may help students to brace themselves to perform accordingly.

Physical activity might be considered a strength and is also connected to SDG number three, Good Health and Well-being. The "Steal the Bacon" activity combines sport and learning English content, which translates to the development of several key competencies. Students also might learn to work as teammates and support each other, some skills that will help them in the future. Lastly, the function of the games, which were designed based on Genial.ly templates, is easy to understand at first sight. Even though most students showed a low level of knowledge regarding how to use a computer (something surprising given their age), they soon comprehended how the games were played.

Nevertheless, turning now to the weaknesses found during the analysis, as part of the students in the questionnaire mentioned in the section above stated, games did not show a high level of difficulty for them. Although teachers should create challenges for their students, the complications of these challenges must be balanced, neither too difficult nor too easy. In this case, games tended to be too easy for half of the survey participants, as seen in Graphic 2.

In the account of the content, although one of the objectives of this article was to improve the Anglo-Saxon cultural knowledge of students using games and the short detective stories subgenre (which might limit the cultural content to the British world), different cultures from English-speaking countries might have been included in the didactic sequence. Nowadays, multiculturalism is a tendency that cannot be denied, and the level of ignorance of culture from societies that are

Figure 4. *SWOT analysis (own design)*
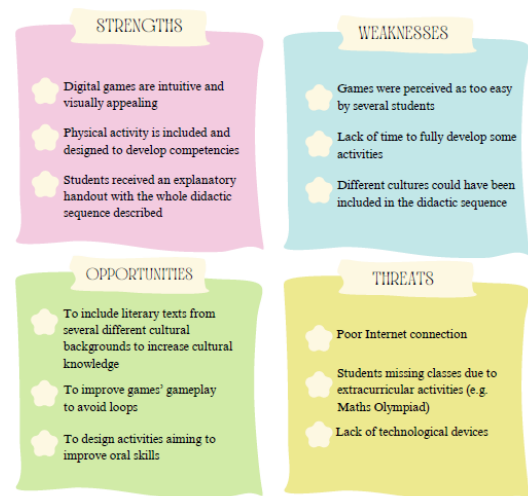
merging with our own culture is tremendous. Therefore, including cultural knowledge from a diversity of societies and cultures connected to the English world would be of great use. The last of the weaknesses found was the management of time. A few activities could not be fully developed due to a lack of time; therefore, some contents were not explored as deeply as they should have been.

Graphic 2. *Level of difficulty of games*

How hard, from 1 to 5, do you think the level of the games was?

15 respuestas
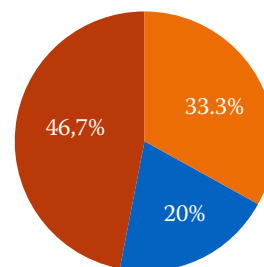
- ● 1. They were pretty easy.
- ● 2. Most of the games were easy.
- ● 3. I didn,t find them easy, but they weren´t that hard
- ● 4. They were a bit difficult
- ● 5. They were pretty hard.

A variety of opportunities for improvement was detected, one of them being the inclusion of literary texts from several different cultural backgrounds. Either teachers focus on one literary genre and develop it from different cultural perspectives, or they choose a different unifying thread to work with cultural awareness and expression key competence, using literature to enlarge students' cultural knowledge offers a wide range of opportunities with promising results. It was also found that, in the Snakes and Ladders game, students sometimes had to face loops due to the gameplay and design of the game, something that might be fixed in the future. Lastly, due to time limitations, oral skills could not be aimed during the didactic sequence. Oral-specific competencies (oral production and oral comprehension) are usually disregarded or developed superficially most of the time due to lack of time to work on them. Nevertheless, the inclusion of a task in which students should make a brief oral presentation concerning their writings might become useful and an opportunity to improve said specific competencies.

Two main threats regarding possible technical issues arose during the analysis, as most of the activities were digital games: the lack of devices for every student (or group) and a poor Internet connection. These two threats might complicate the implementation of the didactic sequence and, therefore, its success; thus, the center's technical possibilities must be considered when designing the didactic sequence or learning situation. Ultimately, a threat experienced during the implementation of the didactic sequence was the absence of some of the students due to their participation in several extracurricular activities, competitions, or tournaments. If there are numerous absences, the collaborative work between students planned for the implementation might be affected, thus jeopardizing the learning experience.

4. Conclusions

Nowadays, societies merge more and more, and multiculturalism has become an undeniable characteristic of today's educational backgrounds. Therefore, as this article proposes, learners will considerably benefit from the acquisition of different cultural knowledge. This investigation aimed to assess whether cultural awareness and expression could be improved through GBL and literature in EFL in Secondary Education. A didactic sequence was designed and implemented in a 3rd ESO class in a semi-private school in order to obtain an answer to this question. Before the design of the didactic sequence, three main objectives were ascertained to keep the focus on answering the research question. All three objectives were accomplished successfully during the implementation. GBL and gamification have been used to teach literature and EFL basic knowledge, and most of the students have improved their skills in both areas, as seen in their writings. Moreover, literature has proved to be a vehicle for improving cultural awareness and expression and the basic knowledge of EFL; this can be seen in both their writings and performances in several games. Lastly, students' perception of their motivation and engagement in the EFL classroom increased notably thanks to the use of a GBL methodology, as they have stated in the questionnaire.

The most obvious finding from this study is that GBL methodologies might be an efficient tool to use whenever the development or acquisition of cultural awareness and expression competence and literature are demanded. The results drawn from this investigation support this statement and confirm several authors' similar results, such as the research carried out by Mikasyte (2018). In this research, GBL has proved not only to be an extremely helpful resource to be considered when designing a learning situation, as it improved engagement and a sense of motivation among

> **Grammar structures and specific vocabulary may be acquired naturally without students even noticing.**

students, but some learners have also stated that introducing games in the EFL classroom helped them recall facts and vocabulary easily. The last game designed, "Steal the Bacon", might be seen as a review of all the cultural knowledge acquired throughout the previous sessions, although it also included new content concerning literature, cultural knowledge and EFL basic knowledge. During the game, I could observe how well students remembered the facts seen in class and the notions they had learnt through the earlier games. Therefore, it can be successfully applied regardless of which content teachers want to introduce to their students.

The second major finding was that literature might be a vehicle to teach some basic knowledge of EFL and improve cultural awareness and expression of key competence. Reading about the background of the development of a literary genre or subgenre helps learners comprehend better the basics that laid the foundations of the features shown in said literary texts, and it also expands their cultural knowledge, being able to learn more about historical and social events that might have promoted the appearance of a literary genre. In addition, grammar structures and specific vocabulary may be acquired naturally without students even noticing.

The evidence from this study suggests that the application of a GBL methodology also increases students' sense of motivation, as can be drawn from the results obtained through the post-questionnaire and the direct observation recordings. The participation rate among non-participative students rose; they showed interest and were willing to take part in the games actively. The engagement among the entirety of the class was also high; thus, these findings suggest a role for GBL in promoting motivation and engagement among secondary EFL learners.

This work contributes to existing knowledge regarding the efficiency of GBL and literature on improving cultural awareness and expression competence as well as the EFL basic knowledge by providing objective and set-in-a-context data drawn from the real implementation of a didactic sequence proposed for a group of teenage students. Nonetheless, this article has some limitations, the major one being the small sample of answers given by students to the questionnaire.

Moreover, the generalizability of these results is subject to certain limitations—for instance, the computer capacity of the center. Furthermore, a good Internet connection is essential so the games can be played successfully, and digital competence can also be addressed. Regarding the use of literature in the EFL classroom as a teaching tool, the most important limitation is that, nowadays, the number of teenagers who do not like reading seems to be increasing year after year. The arrival of new social platforms such as TikTok has greatly influenced teenagers' reading habits, and they tend to show some aversion when readings are suggested in class. It would be interesting to assess the effects of including contemporary young novels in class, as well as the context in which they are developed and why society is craving them more.

This study's findings have several important implications for future practice. One of GBL's best features is its versatility. Therefore, further research might test the implementation of this methodology to improve other key competencies in the EFL classroom, such as STEM. Future trials should assess the impact of using GBL and gamification to improve

some competencies and acquire EFL basic knowledge in a more natural way. In this era where multiculturalism has erased most of the borders, and its presence can be seen in work, academic, and social environments, great cultural awareness and expression development can become a more than helpful tool to face several of the 21st Century challenges society encounters daily. Whether it is done by applying literature, a GBL methodology, or any other approach, its importance and value are nowadays irrefutable, and the EFL classroom could be one of the most suitable environments to do so in a safe way.

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare that they do not have a conflict of interest.

Ethical implications

The participants belonged to a secondary education class and took part in activities related to an internship with one of the authors. Privacy has been maintained.

Authors' contribution

Research design, Both authors; Data analysis (Monello Álvarez); methodology (both authors); manuscript review (Alcantud-Díaz). All the authors have read and approved the submitted version.

Declaration of generative AI-assisted technologies

While preparing this work, the authors used Grammarly solely to correct the use of the English language since neither of them is a native English speaker. After using this tool/service, the authors reviewed and edited the content needed and took full responsibility for the publication's content.

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