GAME-BASED LEARNING: LOWERING THE AFFECTIVE FILTER AND ENHANCING STUDENT AGENCY

APRENDIZAJE BASADO EN JUEGOS: REDUCIENDO EL FILTRO AFECTIVO Y POTENCIANDO LA AGENCIA ESTUDIANTIL

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Game-Based Learning: Lowering the Affective Filter and Enhancing Student Agency

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the implementation of Game-Based Learning (GBL) in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes within a professional technical higher education program in Caldas, Colombia. It explores how this didactic strategy influences students' agency and cognitive engagement, while fostering low-pressure settings that help minimize emotional barriers related to the affective filter. Using a qualitative case study, two classes per week were implemented during an eight-week period with a group of 16 students, collecting data through field notes, a questionnaire, and focus groups. The findings show that GBL promoted motivation, active participation, and collaboration, generating comfortable and trusting environments where students felt confident to engage, take risks, and learn from mistakes. This work emphasizes that playful and interactive activities allowed students to move away from shyness and fear of failure, fostering autonomy and responsibility in their learning process. Ultimately, it shows that the use of GBL not only supports the development of linguistic competences but also strengthens social skills and autonomy, providing teachers with opportunities to design inclusive, participatory, and emotionally safe learning environments.

Keywords: Game-Based Learning (GBL); Affective Filter; Student Agency; Engagement; EFL

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Aprendizaje Basado en Juegos: Reduciendo el Filtro Afectivo y Potenciando la Agencia Estudiantil

RESUMEN

Este estudio se centra en la implementación del Aprendizaje Basado en Juegos (ABJ) en clases de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) dentro de un programa de educación superior técnica profesional en Caldas, Colombia. Se explora cómo esta estrategia didáctica influye en la agencia y el compromiso cognitivo de los estudiantes, al mismo tiempo que fomenta entornos con baja presión que contribuyen a minimizar las barreras emocionales relacionadas con el filtro afectivo. Mediante un estudio de caso cualitativo, se implementaron dos clases por semana durante un periodo de ocho semanas con un grupo de 16 estudiantes, recolectando datos a través de notas de campo, un cuestionario y grupos focales. Los hallazgos muestran que el ABJ promovió la motivación, la participación activa y la colaboración, generando ambientes cómodos y de confianza en los que los estudiantes se sintieron seguros para participar, asumir riesgos y aprender de los errores. Este trabajo enfatiza que las actividades lúdicas e interactivas permitieron a los estudiantes superar la timidez y el miedo al fracaso, fomentando la autonomía y la responsabilidad en su proceso de aprendizaje. En última instancia, se evidencia que el uso del ABJ no solo favorece el desarrollo de competencias lingüísticas, sino que también fortalece las habilidades sociales y la autonomía, brindando a los docentes oportunidades para diseñar entornos de aprendizaje inclusivos, participativos y emocionalmente seguros.

*Palabras clave***:** Aprendizaje Basado en Juegos (ABJ); Filtro Afectivo; Agencia Estudiantil; Compromiso; Inglés como Lengua Extranjera (EFL)

INTRODUCTION

English has become a fundamental component of Colombia's educational system, regarded as a gateway to global integration and to academic and professional opportunities. National programs such as the *Programa Nacional de Bilingüismo*, *Colombia Very Well*, and *Colombia Bilingüe* have promoted English learning as a driver of competitiveness, linking language proficiency to economic growth and employment (Bonilla Carvajal & Tejada-Sánchez, 2016). Beyond economic aims, English occupies a prominent role in political, technological, and cultural spheres, facilitating participation in global academic and professional networks (Rojas & Escobar-Alméciga, 2023). In higher education, it is increasingly used as a medium of instruction, fostering communicative competence and granting access to international knowledge and collaboration (Escobar-Alméciga, 2025). However, Bonilla Carvajal & Tejada-Sánchez (2016) warn that focusing only on English for bilingualism is too narrow; they suggest Colombia should value its many languages, so students are being prepared not only for future employment but also for life as active citizens, capable of engaging meaningfully with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Although these programs have expanded across Colombia, their impact is uneven due to limitations in accessibility, resources, and pedagogical approaches. In regions with economic or infrastructural constraints, schools face shortages of qualified teachers, updated materials, and technological tools necessary for effective English language education (Bonilla Carvajal & Tejada-Sánchez, 2016; Méndez-Rivera *et al.*, 2020; Usma-Wilches, 2009). These conditions often lead to the reliance on traditional, teacher-centered methods that prioritize memorization, training and repetition of linguistic structures over meaningful interaction, inhibiting students' active participation and engagement. In settings where students are not well acquainted with the target language, these situations may increase anxiety, reduce confidence and make learning feel stressful, leading students to be less interested in learning (Rojas & Escobar-Alméciga, 2023). Such dynamics limit the potential of national programs to foster meaningful language acquisition and highlight the need for methodologies that are context-sensitive, participatory, and aligned with learners' realities.

This gap is also visible in higher education. Many students especially those with little previous exposure to the language are usually reluctant to participate and engage. For that reason, Game-Based Learning

(GBL) offers a way to address this situation. By introducing playful, goal-oriented, and interactive activities, GBL helps reduce these emotional barriers, inviting students to participate and build a positive relationship with the language (Squire, 2005). Such a positive connection matters: it transforms English as a foreign language (EFL) from something intimidating into something they can use with purpose. In time, this shift not only strengthens their ability to learn the language but also helps them use it more naturally, confidently, and in authentic situations.

Taking these aspects into account, the research question was established as follows:

How does the implementation of Game-Based Learning influence students' cognitive engagement and their sense of agency in reducing the affective filter in an English as a Foreign Language classroom within a professional technical higher education program?

In accordance with this, the research objectives are presented as:

- Analyze the influence of implementing Game-Based Learning on students' agency and cognitive engagement in English as a Foreign Language classes in a public higher education institution.
- Describe how the learning environment fostered by Game-Based Learning facilitates low-pressure settings and minimizes emotional barriers, thus reducing the affective filter in English as a Foreign Language classes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

GBL has been characterized as a didactic strategy that enhances both the learning and teaching of a foreign language. This methodology, in addition to serving as an alternative tool for teachers, contributes to the creation of more motivating and comfortable learning environments that allow the learner to take on an active role, strengthen their abilities, consolidate and take ownership of their language learning process (Bai, 2024).

GBL as a Didactic Strategy to Reduce the Affective Filter in EFL Classes

GBL is a teaching method that applies the main elements of games, such as clear goals, rules, challenges, feedback, and a sense of progression, to make learning more motivating, engaging, and effective. It can involve games mediated or not by information and communication technologies (ICTs), but its main strength is in creating interactive environments where students actively solve problems, make decisions, and work collaboratively (Adipat et al., 2021). Unlike traditional rigid methods, GBL combines

theoretical content with hands-on activities, allowing students to apply their knowledge in authentic situations while working toward shared goals (Plass et al., 2015). In such a light, GBL turns language classrooms into dynamic spaces where students move from passively receiving information to actively building understanding.

When framed within a communicative approach, GBL becomes a significant tool for lowering Krashen's affective filter in second language acquisition. Krashen (1985) explains that emotional factors such as anxiety, low self-confidence, and fear of negative evaluation can prevent learners from processing comprehensible input, which limits their ability to acquire and learn a language. GBL helps address these challenges by creating enjoyable, low-pressure environments where mistakes are seen as a natural and valuable part of learning rather than as failures (Boctor, 2013). The game format reduces anxiety, encourages positive attitudes, and increases motivation, making it easier for learners to absorb new language (Adipat et al., 2021; Ahmed et al., 2022; Krashen, 1985). In these settings, students are more willing to take risks, try out new language, and participate in real-time communication without the fear of making mistakes in front of others.

Additionally, GBL promotes the development of communicative competences by creating structured opportunities for authentic language use, negotiation of meaning, and collaborative problem-solving. Game tasks encourage learners to share information, clarify misunderstandings, and work together to create strategies which resemble real-life interactions (Adipat et al., 2021). Additionally, follow-up discussions after the game help connect these in-game experiences to real-world use, reinforcing vocabulary, grammar, and pragmatic skills in meaningful contexts (Ahmed, et al., 2022). From a sociocultural perspective, such interactions align with the idea of legitimate peripheral participation in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), where learners gradually move from observing on the sidelines to taking active roles in communication. The interdependence created by shared objectives strengthens both linguistic competence and social cohesion.

GBL contributes to building a supportive classroom community where participation is inclusive, sustained, and personally meaningful (Huang, 2023). The shared challenges and achievements that arise during gameplay help build group cohesion and mutual support, turning the classroom into a space where learners feel comfortable expressing themselves (Pivec et al., 2003). Carefully designed teaching

strategies such as including culturally relevant content, setting goals that are challenging yet achievable, and giving students a degree of autonomy keep learners engaged while affirming their role as active participants in the learning process. This sense of community not only boosts motivation but also reflects the principles of communicative language teaching, which place interaction at the heart of language acquisition. In this way, language learning becomes emotionally safe and socially authentic (Escobar-Alméciga, 2025).

GBL as a Process to Promote Student Agency and the Learning of EFL

It is no longer necessary to imagine a classroom where students are learning English implicitly, in a more pleasant and fun way, because this is now a demonstrable reality. In an EFL classroom, it is very common to find unmotivated, disinterested students with little participation, which may result in "they may lose confidence and generate negative emotions, such as Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA)" (Yang et al., 2022, p.2). These barriers, closely linked to the affective filter, are very frequent and prevent the development of real competences necessary for language acquisition. In response to this issue, GBL emerges as a didactic strategy that, in addition to reducing that affective filter, fosters engagement and promotes the active participation of students, thus developing their student agency (Chan & Lo, 2024). Games allow students to move away from mechanical memorization and the conventional mode of learning a foreign language. Learning a new language has always been associated with using workbooks, printed resources and traditional activities; however, these generally focus more on grammatical content, leaving aside other necessary skills. In fact, "some teachers regard games as a leisure time activity without any educational value" (Ahmed et al., 2022, p.4), and as a result, students are not able to develop various linguistic and communicative skills.

Students, while playing, can learn and reflect on their choices. Making mistakes is one of the most common threats that cause students to fear participating in class, whether due to fear of being judged or corrected. Through games, making mistakes becomes a way of learning, "pushes players to keep working out ways to progress, responding to feedback along the way" (Nguyen, 2020, p.52) in a way that makes them feel safer and not take it negatively, but rather as a strategy for continuing the activity. GBL not only fosters motivation but also allows students to take ownership of their learning process. When we have a safe and pleasant environment, "games might be advantageous as they reduce students'

anxiety and give them opportunities for real communication" (Ahmed et al., 2022, p.4), allowing them to actively shape their own progress. Through this, students set personal goals and select strategies that fit their needs to achieve these goals, while at the same time developing their autonomy, resilience, and commitment to learning both inside and outside the classroom. As noted by Sykes, Oskoz, and Thorne (2008, as cited in Zourou, 2020), "students' agency (…) has the potential to evolve beyond the confines of the subject-position associated with the conventional institutional identity of 'student'."

Overall, this GBL strategy, in addition to reducing the affective filter, promotes students' agency through their motivation, engagement, and active participation. If the person learning the language feels more comfortable, this will help them take ownership of their learning process and reflect on the decisions made regarding it. Being interested in the language is a fundamental aspect of its acquisition, as it will lead the learner to seek out many more tools and become more autonomous and aware in continuing the process both inside and outside the classroom (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011).

METHOD

This research was framed as a qualitative case study, which allows for a deeper and more contextualized exploration of participants' perceptions and experiences, enabling the adaptation of its development to the diverse circumstances of the study through its characteristics of flexibility and openness (Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza, 2018). This flexible approach meant that no rigid path was followed; rather, the study adapted to the realities of the context.

Within this framework, the present paper pursues two main objectives: first, to analyze the influence of implementing GBL on students' agency and cognitive engagement in EFL classes in a public higher education institution; and second, to describe how the learning environment fostered by GBL facilitates low-pressure settings and minimizes emotional barriers, thus influencing the affective filter in the same context. Accordingly, the analysis centers on the experiences that students can have through interactive and communicative games, which foster cognitive engagement, facilitate emotional regulation, and increase motivation as key elements in their process of acquiring EFL and its respective competencies.

The study was carried out in a public higher education institution in the eastern region of Caldas, Colombia, with a group of 16 third-semester students with an age range between 15 and 22 years who are enrolled in a technical program in Business Processes, first level of the Technology in Business

Management (Economy and Business area). It is a professional technical program offered in the evening shift under a face-to-face modality, in which English is considered a core course. This course is the first of the four levels offered by the institution and aims to provide students with an approach to the language, ensuring that graduates from higher education institutions are better prepared for the labor market (Ministry of National Education of Colombia [MEN], 2014). The institution has a wide variety of resources for student and teacher use. The classrooms are equipped with tv sets, computers, and internet access, as well as access to a Language, and Technology Laboratory that allows the merging of EFL learning through games along with the use of technology.

However, an influential factor was that for most of these students, this subject is their first significant contact with a foreign language, as stated by them, their foundations regarding secondary education level are limited and, in some cases, nonexistent. This gap between expected prior knowledge and actual knowledge, in addition to their previous experiences, significantly impacted the way students perceived the subject, and their reluctance to participate or interact was noticeable, despite the fact that as a group, they have been together for over a year.

In light of these class conditions, the pedagogical intervention of the GBL strategy was carried out in order to describe and analyze its influence on reducing the affective filter and students' behavior in their learning process. This research was conducted over eight weeks, with a total of two weekly sessions, each lasting 1.5 hours, in which, during these sessions, the pre-service teacher sought to implement games in most practical stages and some theoretical ones. The class dynamics included games with verbal and kinesthetic components, along with grammar topics, using both physical and technological tools, providing engaging contexts or narratives, clear objectives, elements of competition, collaboration, reflection, and personalization, all tied to feedback.

 "In qualitative research, you collect data to learn from the participants in the study and develop forms, called protocols, for recording data as the study proceeds" (Creswell, 2012, p. 17). For this study, students and/or guardians voluntarily signed informed consent forms, and three data collection methods were employed: field notes/observations, a questionnaire, and two focus groups. Field notes were taken through non-participant observation (Creswell, 2013), focusing on cognitive engagement, agency, interaction, emotional response, and overall learning experiences, systematically recorded after each

session. An anonymous digital questionnaire with 10 open-ended questions was applied in the students' mother tongue and is presented in a translated version in this paper to explore emotions, comfort, perception of learning, participation, motivation, and agency (Eckerdal & Hagström, 2017). Finally, two 25-minute focus groups of 8 students each were conducted, as group discussions are useful for exploring participants' emotions, thoughts, and experiences (Wisker, 2001, as cited in Tümen Akyıldız & Ahmed, 2021), and were audio-recorded to collect spontaneous opinions about their learning process with games. For ethical reasons, the original names of all participants have been changed in this paper.

DATA ANALYSIS

To achieve the purpose of this study, an interpretative analysis of the collected data was carried out. The analysis included the pre-service teacher's field notes, the questionnaire, and the two focus groups, all of which were meticulously reviewed through data triangulation. By triangulating across data sources, data collection methods, and theoretical perspectives, the findings were validated and reinforced. This process allowed for the validation of the findings using the methodological tool of open coding, thus leading to the following codes:

Table 1
Open codes emerged from analysis

Code	Explanation
Engagement	The extent to which learners are actively involved, emotionally invested, and mentally focused in the learning process. It includes behavioral participation, emotional connection, and cognitive effort (Fredricks et al., 2004).
Active Participation	The meaningful involvement of individuals in shared activities where they engage not only through actions but also through thought, emotion, and attitude. It emphasizes collaboration, engagement with challenging content, and a sense of responsibility within a group or community context (Hsu, 2021).

Note. Self-elaboration

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The construction of a learning environment in an EFL class is strongly influenced by emotional factors such as anxiety, fear, boredom, and frustration. GBL arises as a method to reduce stress, overcome fear, and create comfortable spaces to develop language skills (Ismayilli et al., 2025), enhancing participation and commitment. In this research, the pre-service teacher implemented games mainly in practical moments of the sessions. Although sometimes students got distracted, in these spaces, especially in competitive activities with grammar and thematic content, their attention was focused, evidencing the influence of games on the learning environment.

This research aimed to analyze the influence of games on students' autonomy and engagement, and to describe how they minimized emotional barriers. Students' interactions with the game tools and with three agents—pre-service teacher–student, student–pre-service teacher, and student–student—created more comfortable spaces and greater willingness, facilitating teaching and learning. This analysis aligned with the two emerging codes of the research: engagement as the main category and active participation as a subcategory closely connected to that engagement.

Fostering student engagement mediated by classroom dynamics and games

Engagement is not limited only to visible participation, it includes a connection with diverse components such as the cognitive, emotional, and affective. To foster relaxing and welcoming learning environments that reduce students' anxiety and stress, teachers could use games, in addition to not limiting themselves strictly to the individual component, but also to working on multidirectional communication when collaborating and creating interactive and cooperative processes (Ahmed et al., 2022).

Encouraging students' motivation and fostering a sense of emotional security to participate, and to take risks without fear of making mistakes allows the reduction of the affective filter by providing support, confidence, and freedom to make mistakes as part of their learning process, which at the same time allows the acquisition of knowledge and enhances their commitment. Based on this, the following excerpts illustrate the influence of this methodology on the students.

Table 2.
Excerpt 1: Confidence and Emotional support through games.

En tu opinión, ¿los juegos en clase realmente te han ayudado a aprender inglés?	In your opinion, have the games in class really helped you learn English?
Andrea: Sí, cada vez que tengo clase de inglés me encanta. *Compartir con mis compañeros y docente me hace sentir más en confianza, segura y que puedo preguntar sin miedo, que puedo equivocarme mil veces y mil veces aprender,* y, (…) puedo sentirme feliz.	**Andrea:** Yes, every time I have an English class I love it. *Sharing with my classmates and the teacher makes me feel more confident and secure, and that I can ask questions without fear, that I can make mistakes a thousand times and learn a thousand times,* and, (…) I can feel happy.

Note. Questionnaire, question number 10

Table 3.
Excerpt 2: Motivation and active involvement in learning.

¿Crees que con los juegos fue diferente a otras formas en que has aprendido inglés?	Do you think that with the games it was different from other ways you have learned English?
Felipe: (...) Eso le da *ganas a uno de seguir aprendiendo, de seguir estando*, de *seguir siendo responsable*, y no solamente, pues, venir por venir, sino que, de pronto, *motivarse un poquito más, aprender el idioma, compartir más,* aprender más y *estar con los compañeros*. Y eso es bonito, muy bonito.	**Felipe:** (...) That [referring to the games and the methodologies implemented by the pre-service teacher] *makes one want to keep learning, to keep being present, to keep being responsible*, not just coming for the sake of coming, but also, perhaps, *to motivate oneself a little more, learn the language, share more*, learn more, and *be with classmates*. And that is beautiful, very beautiful.

Note. Focus group number 2

In Excerpt 1, when the student stated that she felt *"more confident and secure"* and *"I can ask questions without fear,"* she revealed that the classroom creates an emotionally safe and supportive space provided by both peers and the pre-service teacher, which helps reduce anxiety. Likewise, the fact that they

repeated the phrase *"a thousand times"* confirms this freedom to take risks in order to learn, as part of a continuous cycle.

In the Excerpt 2, the student highlights the importance of games on his motivation and responsibility. With the phrases *"want to keep learning"* and *"to keep being responsible"*, it is shown how he feels engaged and committed to the subject. The idea of *"motivate oneself a little more"* connects to autonomy, while *"share more…be with classmates"* reflects the social aspect of engagement. As such, this allows us to show that GBL not only enables the creation of enjoyable lessons but also promotes commitment, interaction, and collaboration.

In both excerpts, we could see that emotional connection acquired by the students is reflected in the sustained motivation that reinforces both the individual and social component, as a pressure-free environment is perceived in the classroom. In addition, it is also evidenced the fact that "engaged learners are more likely to retain material and excel academically, making this significant" (Zakaria & Zakaria, 2025, p. 2236), given that students do not see the game as something separate from learning, but as a different tool that gives them the opportunity to be in constant interaction with the language and other agents such as classmates, teachers, and even external entities, since their process is not limited only to the classroom.

Likewise, based on the fact that engagement has a strong social component that is affectively and emotionally influential (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011), many times in teaching practice, empathy and support among peers and teachers are crucial for students to trust and empower themselves in the process of acquiring a language. The implementation of GBL also allows interactive and collaborative situations where students can learn from each other, increase the sense of unity, and build social skills that not only serve for the academic field, but that are also very important for life (Cahya Susaniari & Santosa, 2024). This can be evidenced in the following excerpt.

Table 4.
Excerpt 3: Reducing anxiety and building a supportive environment.

Initially, the students showed *signs of nervousness before carrying out the activities*. Later, *many of these games allowed the students to feel a bit more comfortable participating* and introducing themselves (which was the second activity of the session).

Something particular that happened was that *one student, when introducing herself, cried* while talking about herself and her family *due to a combination of nerves and nostalgia*. However, *the support provided by her classmates allowed her to finish her presentation, calm her nerves, and feel in a space where she was not judged and was supported.*

Note. Pre-service teacher field notes, session 1

In these field notes from the pre-service teacher, presented in Excerpt 3, it was observed that a student, during the introductory presentation activity in the first session, reacted by crying due to the nervousness of being in front of all her classmates and talking about her family. In response to that emotional situation there was *"support provided by her classmates"* and a *"space where she was not judged,"* which reveals that the student was able to express her feelings and realize that she was in a place where she was accepted and could feel safe. The tears can be seen as representing the emotional barriers the student faced, but with the low-pressure environment previously created by the games and the peers' reactions, there was no limitation preventing her from managing her feelings and completing her presentation activity. This reinforces that emotional support is fundamental for enhancing engagement, confidence, and active participation.

In this sense, the environment of mutual support favors the emotional disposition and builds confidence and motivation to face many of the barriers in language learning. That is why "exploring methods [such as those focused on games] to improve students' motivation to learn English could create more competent English learners" (Gamlo, 2019, p.49), which integrate various dimensions that allow them to use the language effectively in real practice.

Overall, engagement in GBL goes beyond visible participation given that it integrates cognitive, emotional, and affective dimensions that allow the creation of pleasant environments that reduce anxiety and the affective filter, facilitating the disposition and motivation to learn. In addition, classes with

games create safe spaces to learn from mistakes, and to connect emotionally with others (teacher and classmates), allowing social interaction, accompaniment, and empowerment of learning processes that can transcend outside the classroom.

The manifestation of active participation as a response to meaningful learning experiences

Students' participation can be understood as an involvement in classroom tasks, encompassing cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions that position learners as contributors to their own and others' learning. Engagement serves as the entry point for this process, while active participation becomes a visible expression, when students take risks, speak up, and assume genuine responsibility for their learning (Zakaria & Zakaria, 2025). Within this framework, game-based activities created opportunities for students to move beyond passive attendance and toward intentional, self-directed involvement. This transformation was evidenced in two main ways. First, learners shifted from hesitation to initiative. Second, collaboration grew as students learned together, supported each other, and shared ideas, which led to a sense of ownership where participation meant actively taking charge of learning.

To begin with, we observed a transformation among learners who initially appeared hesitant but gradually became proactive contributors during the lessons. Game-based activities reframed participation as a low-pressure and enjoyable experience, reducing anxiety and fostering small yet meaningful steps toward involvement. This transformation is illustrated in the following excerpts.

Table 5.
Excerpt 4: Increased participation through games.

¿Cómo ves tu participación en clase y de qué manera los juegos influyen en tu motivación durante las lecciones?	**How do you see your participation in class, and how do the games influence your motivation during the lessons?**
Carlos: *A mí me cuesta mucho participar, pero con los juegos me han ayudado a soltarme más y a participar en cada clase*, ya que, gracias a los juegos, aprendo más y se me facilita la clase.	**Carlos:** It's *very difficult for me* to participate, but the *games have helped me relax more and participate in every class*, since thanks to the games I learn more, and the class feels easier for me.

Note. Questionnaire, question number 6

Table 6.
Excerpt 5: Overcoming language barriers.

¿Cómo te describirías en términos de ser más introvertido o extrovertido, y de qué maneras, si es que ha ocurrido, ha cambiado esto durante las clases de inglés?	How would you describe yourself in terms of being more introverted or extroverted, and in what ways, if any, has this changed during English classes?
María: *Soy una persona muy tímida y las clases han ayudado mucho en este proceso de ser más participativa.* Siento que las clases sí me han marcado positivamente, ya que son muy dinámicas y eso hace que el aprendizaje fluya, permitiéndome mejorar cada día.	**María:** I am a *very shy person, and the classes have helped me a lot in becoming more participative.* I feel that the classes have had a positive impact because they are very dynamic, which allows learning to flow and helps me improve every day.

Note. Questionnaire, question number 7

As it was noted above, there was a clear transition from students' reluctance, often connected to shyness and the difficulty of speaking, to a more active and consistent participation in class. Students admitted that participation was *"very difficult"* or that they were *"very shy,"* but also pointed out how the class approach helped them change this attitude. One explained, *"the games have helped me relax more and participate in every class,"* while another shared, *"the classes have helped me a lot in becoming more participative."* This implies that low-pressure and engaging activities reduce students' anxiety, encourage them to take risks, and make participation feel natural (Hui & Lin, 2008). This movement from hesitation to initiative suggests that reluctance can be transformed when the classroom environment emphasizes comfort, enjoyment, and relevance (Escobar-Alméciga, 2025). As such, lowering anxiety has been shown to facilitate language use, and meaningful activities increase learners' willingness to contribute to classroom discussions and collaborative learning.

Also, we may say active participation was present in the ways students collaborated and took responsibility for their own learning. They not only followed directions but also began to contribute with ideas, support one another, and make decisions to tackle challenges, showing that participation involved a shared sense of responsibility rather than dependence on the teacher. This is presented in the

next excerpts.

Table 7.
Excerpt 6: Student reflection, autonomy, and responsibility in learning

¿De qué manera has reflexionado sobre tu proceso de aprendizaje y qué aprendizajes o conclusiones has obtenido de ello?	In what ways have you reflected on your learning process, and what insights have you gained from it?
Camila: (...) uno también tiene que *apersonarse, tener autonomía, y por parte de uno mismo, estudiar* (...) es que uno no todo lo tiene que dejar en las manos de los profesores, *usted tiene que buscar explicaciones y tener iniciativa.*	**Camila:** (...) One also has *to take responsibility, be autonomous, and on one's own, study* (…) it's not that everything has to be left in the teachers' hands; *you have to look for explanations and take initiative.*

Note. Focus group number 1

Table 8.
Excerpt 7: Emotional safety, confidence, and support in learning

¿Cómo te has sentido en las clases? ¿Cómo eran las clases antes?	How have you felt in the classes? What were the classes like before?
Elvia: (...) Yo, en lo personal me he sentido muy bien. De pronto, por ejemplo, para mí, es muy difícil, o yo nunca había estado en un escenario donde hubiese, pues, como que hubiera que hablar, como hacer una exposición. (...) *Pero a mí me pareció muy positivo que usted, en ningún momento, primero, no nos corrigió delante de las otras personas, porque, pues, eso hace que uno sí se sienta mal, y también hizo que todos fuéramos receptivos en que, si la otra persona estuviese diciendo una palabra que de pronto no se decía así*, uno, pues, tenía la convicción de: "No, no creo que sea así", pues nadie dijera nada por respeto, ¿cierto? *Porque entendimos que era un proceso donde estábamos todos en conjunto aprendiendo.*	**Elvia:** (…) Personally, I have felt very good. For me, for example, it was very difficult, or I had never been in a situation where I had to speak, like giving a presentation. (…) *I found it very positive that you, at no time, corrected us in front of the others, because it made all of us receptive to the idea that, if someone was saying a word that maybe wasn't said that way,* we would think: 'No, I don't think that's how it's said,' but no one said anything out of respect, right? *Because we understood that it was a process where we were all learning together.*

Note. Focus group number 2

We could see how students combined collaboration with responsibility for their own learning. Camila expressed that, *she had to take responsibility, be autonomous, and study on her own,* showing an awareness that learning required personal commitment, and initiative, positioning the learner as an active agent rather than a passive recipient of instruction (Bardorfer, 2024). Elvia highlighted that not being corrected in front of others created a respectful and receptive environment, where students could recognize possible mistakes without feeling exposed. At the same time, she saw this as a possibility to reflect on the mistakes of others, which later made it possible to gradually point out collective corrections.

The creation of a comprehensive, welcoming, and collaborative environment in which all participants are actively involved enables mutual support and the co-construction of knowledge. It reflects a sociocultural understanding of learning, where individuals are seen as active participants responsible for their own growth. At the same time, it aligns with research on learner autonomy, which points to self-direction as a key factor in keeping people engaged and involved over time. (Solórzano-García, 2025; Muhayimana, 2017). Thus, an interplay between collaboration and ownership became evident, with students taking responsibility for their own learning while contributing to a respectful and collective process of knowledge-building.

Overall, the findings indicate that participation developed as a process where students combined personal responsibility with collective collaboration. Game-based activities played a key role in this transformation by reducing anxiety, encouraging initiative, and creating a safe environment for risk-taking. As learners became more autonomous while also supporting one another, participation shifted from passive compliance to an active practice of shared responsibility and co-construction of knowledge.

CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to analyze the influence of implementing GBL on students' agency and cognitive engagement in EFL classes in a professional technical higher education program, as well as to describe how such a learning environment fosters low-pressure settings and minimizes emotional barriers related to the affective filter.

The results revealed that playful and goal-oriented activities helped create a low-pressure learning

environment with greater emotional support, as learners felt welcomed, motivated, confident, and willing to engage in communicative actions during the sessions. This atmosphere contributed to the reduction of the affective filter by decreasing anxiety and fear of making mistakes, allowing students to take risks, express themselves, learn from errors and participate in meaning negotiation, which is part of an authentic communicative process conducive to knowledge construction and, ultimately, learning. Moreover, GBL fostered the transformation of students into active agents capable of reflecting on their learning, making decisions, and taking responsibility for their progress. Their autonomy and collaboration developed through games not only strengthened social bonds and mutual support among classmates but also reinforced emotional security and collective learning, leading to the construction of a community of practice, considering that learning is fundamentally a social process (Lave & Wenger, 1991). A key finding was that, when the right conditions are set for a welcoming learning environment, students are more likely to enjoy, engage, invest, and take on both individual and collective roles that are fundamental to EFL acquisition.

The results also suggest that a communicative approach to language teaching is key not only to develop linguistic skills but also engagement, self-confidence, and agency, necessary to participate and effectively learn and use a target language for communicative purposes. Furthermore, the research shows that game dynamics can strengthen not only linguistic competence but also social skills and autonomy, offering teachers practical ways to design more inclusive, participatory, and emotionally sensitive classrooms.

However, among the limitations of this research it is the fact that the intervention was limited to eight weeks, which did not allow for the observation of other effects on students' learning process toward the target language. In addition, another limiting factor was the inability of observing how students' perceptions and sense of agency toward language learning evolved over time.

For future research, this work highlights the value of integrating diverse approaches to develop engaging lessons and create appropriate learning environments that include all students and build on their learning processes, giving room to develop more integral language users and citizens. In this way, it is recommended to implement GBL strategies that integrate intercultural contexts and technological components when possible, while also adapting existing resources and games to specific learning

objectives to strengthen both linguistic competences and students' holistic development. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that when learning environments are designed through game-based and communicative approaches, language learning becomes not only more effective but also fosters confident, autonomous, and socially engaged English learners capable of using the language meaningfully beyond the classroom.

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