

THE ROLE OF GAMIFICATION AS AN ENGLISH TEACHER ASSISTANT

Bagus Yuda Prawira¹, Widhya Putriana²

Universitas Bakti Indonesia

e-mail: yudaprawira132@gmail.com, putrianawidhya@gmail.com

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ABSTRAK

Pembelajaran bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa asing (EFL) di tingkat sekolah menengah pertama sering menghadapi tantangan berupa rendahnya motivasi, keterlibatan siswa yang terbatas, dan kesulitan mempelajari kosakata melalui pembelajaran konvensional. Gamifikasi menawarkan alternatif dengan mengintegrasikan elemen permainan ke dalam kegiatan pembelajaran untuk meningkatkan keterlibatan siswa. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji penggunaan gamifikasi sebagai sarana pendukung dalam pengajaran EFL, respons siswa, dan tantangan penerapannya. Penelitian menggunakan desain kualitatif deskriptif yang didukung survei dengan melibatkan seorang guru bahasa Inggris dan 38 siswa kelas 7–9. Data dikumpulkan melalui survei terstruktur, wawancara semi-terstruktur, dan observasi pembelajaran yang melibatkan Kahoot!, Wordwall, Baamboozle, dan Wayground. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan respons positif siswa, terutama dalam motivasi, kesenangan belajar, partisipasi, dan persepsi terhadap pembelajaran kosakata. Gamifikasi juga memberikan peluang untuk kolaborasi dan pembelajaran berdiferensiasi. Namun, penerapannya menghadapi tantangan berupa ketidakstabilan koneksi internet dan kecenderungan siswa terlalu berfokus pada kompetisi daripada tujuan pembelajaran. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa gamifikasi dapat menjadi sarana pendukung pembelajaran EFL apabila dirancang dan difasilitasi secara terarah oleh guru.

Kata Kunci: *Gamifikasi, Asisten Guru Bahasa Inggris, Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing (EFL), Pembelajaran Berbasis Permainan, Sekolah Menengah Pertama*

ABSTRACT

English as a foreign language (EFL) instruction at the junior high school level often faces challenges related to low student motivation, limited engagement, and difficulties in learning vocabulary through conventional instruction. Gamification offers an alternative by integrating game elements into learning activities to increase student engagement. This study aimed to examine the use of gamification as an instructional aid in EFL teaching, students' responses, and implementation challenges. A descriptive qualitative design supported by a survey was employed, involving one English teacher and 38 students from Grades 7–9. Data were collected through a structured survey, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations involving Kahoot!, Wordwall, Baamboozle, and Wayground. The findings showed positive student responses, particularly in motivation, enjoyment, participation, and perceptions of vocabulary learning. Gamification also provided opportunities for collaboration and differentiated learning. However, implementation challenges included unstable internet connectivity and students' tendency to focus excessively on competition rather than learning objectives. These findings indicate that gamification can serve as a supportive instructional aid in EFL classrooms when purposefully designed and facilitated by teachers.

Keywords: *Gamification, English Teacher Assistant, EFL, Game-Based Learning, Junior High School*



INTRODUCTION

English language learning at the junior secondary school level in Indonesia continues to face challenges related to student participation and motivation. Many students remain passive during English lessons, demonstrate limited involvement in classroom activities, and consequently may not engage optimally with the learning process (Faiqiah & Hapsari, 2025; Siregar & Degeng, 2025). Teachers also face difficulties in sustaining students' attention when instruction relies predominantly on conventional, teacher-centered practices, such as explanation, textbook exercises, and repetitive drills. These challenges highlight the need for instructional approaches that provide greater opportunities for interaction, participation, and immediate feedback. Although contemporary learners are increasingly familiar with interactive digital environments, their familiarity with technology does not automatically guarantee active engagement in learning. Therefore, the pedagogical value of digital tools depends on how teachers integrate them into meaningful classroom activities.

Gamification has emerged as one approach that can support student engagement in educational contexts. It refers to the use of game elements in non-game contexts, including rewards, challenges, feedback, points, and other performance-related features, to shape learners' experiences and participation (Hong et al., 2024). Previous research indicates that appropriately designed gamification can contribute to students' engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes (Zeng et al., 2024). In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, platforms such as Kahoot!, Baamboozle, Wayground, ESL Games Plus, and Wordwall allow teachers to incorporate game-based elements into language learning activities. However, gamification should not be understood merely as the use of digital platforms. Its instructional value is closely related to how teachers select the platform, design the activity, provide feedback, manage interaction, and connect game elements with learning objectives. In this sense, gamification can function as an instructional aid that supports teachers in creating more interactive learning experiences rather than replacing the teacher's pedagogical role.

The potential of gamification can be understood through Sociocultural Theory and Self-Determination Theory. From a sociocultural perspective, learning is mediated through social interaction and culturally constructed tools, with teachers and peers contributing to learners' development through scaffolding and interaction (Poehner & Lu, 2024). Gamified activities, particularly collaborative quizzes and team-based challenges, can provide opportunities for students to interact with peers and teachers while using language in socially mediated learning situations. Self-Determination Theory provides a complementary motivational perspective by emphasizing the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in fostering motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2022; Howard et al., 2021). Gamified activities may support these needs when students are given opportunities to make choices, experience progress and mastery through feedback, and interact with classmates. Nevertheless, these benefits are not automatic. The motivational effects of gamification depend on how game elements and rewards are designed (Xiao & Hew, 2024). In EFL contexts, gamification therefore requires clear pedagogical purposes, alignment with learning objectives, and an appropriate progression of activities (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2022).

Previous research provides substantial evidence regarding the potential of gamification in education, but the focus of research has gradually shifted from determining whether gamification works toward examining how and under what conditions it works. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses have reported generally positive relationships between gamification, learner engagement, and learning outcomes (Saleem & Mirza, 2022; Zeng et al., 2024). In EFL contexts, the use of Kahoot! and similar platforms has been associated with behavioral,



cognitive, and emotional engagement as well as increased motivation (Alawadhi & Abu-Ayyash, 2021; Ardi & Rianita, 2022). Research in Indonesian junior high schools has also reported increased student engagement through gamified learning activities, including non-digital forms of gamification (Simbolon, 2025). At the same time, previous studies emphasize that teachers remain important in determining how gamification is implemented in classroom practice (Ardi & Rianita, 2022; Permana et al., 2024). Recent studies have also examined platforms that are accessible to younger learners (Destriana & Farida, 2025; Fitriani et al., 2025), while adaptive gamification has received increasing attention because game elements can potentially be adjusted according to learners' characteristics or performance (Bennani et al., 2022; Abbes et al., 2024). Taken together, these studies suggest that the effectiveness of gamification cannot be separated from the instructional decisions and classroom context in which it is implemented.

Despite this growing body of research, an important gap remains in understanding gamification from the perspective of practicing teachers in authentic junior high school EFL classrooms. Many previous studies have focused on learning outcomes, student perceptions, or the implementation of a particular gamification platform, while other studies have been conducted in higher education or among pre-service teachers (Faiqiah & Hapsari, 2025). Consequently, less is known about how practicing English teachers integrate multiple gamification platforms into routine classroom instruction across different grade levels, how students respond to these practices, and what challenges teachers encounter during implementation. This gap is particularly important because gamification is not simply a technological intervention; its classroom value depends on teacher facilitation, including the selection of activities, organization of interaction, provision of feedback, and alignment between game mechanics and learning objectives. Therefore, examining actual teacher practices can provide a more contextualized understanding of gamification than evaluating a single platform in isolation. The present study addresses this gap by positioning gamification as a teacher-facilitated instructional aid rather than as a stand-alone technological intervention.

The study was conducted at SMP GRETA Jajag, Banyuwangi, where an English teacher routinely incorporates gamification into English instruction across Grades 7, 8, and 9. The setting is particularly relevant because students have access to digital devices and internet connectivity, while the school supports interactive and technology-integrated learning. This context provides an opportunity to examine how gamification is integrated into everyday EFL instruction across three grade levels rather than within a single class or through a single platform. Accordingly, this study aims to describe how an English teacher uses gamification as an instructional tool in Grades 7, 8, and 9, explore how students respond to its use in English language learning, and identify the challenges and opportunities experienced by the teacher in integrating gamification into EFL instruction. Guided by Sociocultural Theory and Self-Determination Theory, the study examines the teacher's use of gamification, students' responses to gamified learning activities, and the challenges and opportunities that emerge during implementation. More specifically, the study seeks to answer how the English teacher uses gamification as an instructional tool across Grades 7, 8, and 9, how students in these grade levels respond to its use in English language learning, and what challenges and opportunities the teacher identifies when integrating gamification into EFL instruction.

METHOD

Research Design and Participants

This study employed a descriptive qualitative design supported by a survey to describe the use of gamification in English language learning and students' responses to its implementation in a natural classroom setting. The qualitative data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with one English teacher and twelve students, while supporting quantitative descriptive data were collected through a questionnaire administered to 38 students. The study was conducted at SMP GRETA Jajag, Banyuwangi, a junior high school that had been established approximately six years prior to the study. Before data collection, the researcher conducted preliminary communication with the English teacher through WhatsApp to obtain initial information about the use and variety of gamification tools in English lessons. The preliminary information indicated that the teacher used digital game-based tools in at least 50% of English lessons during the academic semester. The participants were selected based on their direct involvement in gamification-integrated English learning.

The study involved one English teacher and 38 students from Grades 7, 8, and 9. The teacher was purposively selected because of her direct involvement in planning and implementing gamified English instruction. The 38 students participated in the survey, while twelve students were selected for semi-structured interviews using maximum variation sampling. Four students were selected from each grade level to represent variation in gender, English proficiency, and learning backgrounds. This sampling strategy was used to obtain diverse perspectives on students' experiences with gamification across the three grade levels. The teacher and twelve selected students served as qualitative interview participants, whereas all 38 students served as survey respondents.

Instruments and Data Collection

Three data collection techniques were used: questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observation. The questionnaire was administered to all 38 students and consisted of 15 Likert-scale items rated on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The questionnaire covered four domains: motivation and engagement, perceived learning outcomes, ease of use of gamification tools, and preference for gamified instruction. The questionnaire was developed by adapting previously validated instruments from Bai, Hew, and Huang (2020) and Zhang and Hasim (2023). The questionnaire served as supporting data to complement the qualitative findings rather than as the primary basis for drawing conclusions.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the English teacher and twelve selected students. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to allow participants to express their experiences comfortably and fluently. The interviews were subsequently transcribed and translated into English for analysis. The interview questions addressed four main themes: instructional strategies, gamification platform preferences, student responses, and perceived challenges and limitations. Classroom observations were also conducted during the initial two weeks of data collection to understand the instructional context and observe how gamification was integrated into English lessons. The main focus of observation was the teacher's use of gamification, student participation, classroom interaction, and the use of digital game-based platforms. The instruments and their relationship to the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Research Instruments and Data Sources

No.	Theme	Instrument/Technique	Data Source
1	Motivation and Engagement	Survey and Interview	Students and Teacher
2	Ease of Use of Gamification Tools	Survey and Interview	Students and Teacher
3	Teacher's Instructional Strategy	Interview and Observation	Teacher
4	Student Responses to Gamification	Survey and Interview	Students
5	Challenges and Limitations	Interview and Observation	Teacher

Data collection was conducted over six weeks during one semester. During the first two weeks, classroom observations were conducted to familiarize the researcher with the instructional context and document the implementation of gamification. In Week 3, the questionnaire was administered to all 38 students. Teacher and student interviews were conducted during Weeks 4 and 5. In Week 6, member checking was conducted by sharing the preliminary qualitative findings with the English teacher to verify the accuracy of the interpretation and minimize possible misinterpretation of the teacher's responses.

Population and Sampling

The population consisted of one English teacher and all students involved in English language learning at SMP GRETA Jajag across Grades 7, 8, and 9. The survey involved all 38 students, while the qualitative interview sample consisted of one English teacher and twelve students. The teacher was selected purposively based on her direct involvement in implementing gamification in English lessons. The twelve student interviewees were selected through maximum variation sampling, with four students representing each grade level. The sampling considered variation in gender, English proficiency, and learning background to capture diverse experiences of gamification.

Table 2. Research Population, Sample, and Data Sources

No.	Participant Category	Population	Sample	Sampling Method	Data Source
1	English Teacher (ET)	English teacher at SMP GRETA Jajag	1 teacher	Purposive sampling	Interview and Observation
2	Grade 7 Students (S)	All Grade 7 EFL students	4 students for interview; all Grade 7 students for survey	Maximum variation sampling for interview	Survey and Interview
3	Grade 8 Students (S)	All Grade 8 EFL students	4 students for interview; all Grade 8 students for survey	Maximum variation sampling for interview	Survey and Interview

4	Grade 9 Students (S)	All Grade 9 EFL students	4 students for interview; all Grade 9 students for survey	Maximum variation sampling for interview	Survey and Interview
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As presented in Table 2, the qualitative component involved 13 interview participants, consisting of one English teacher and twelve students, while the supporting survey involved all 38 students. The twelve student interviewees were distributed equally across Grades 7, 8, and 9, with four students from each grade level. Maximum variation sampling was applied to the student interview sample to obtain diverse perspectives based on gender, English proficiency, and learning backgrounds. The combination of survey responses, interviews, and classroom observations enabled data triangulation by comparing students' reported responses with the perspectives of the teacher and observations of gamification practices in the classroom.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Qualitative data from the teacher and student interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2022). The analysis involved familiarizing the researcher with the interview transcripts, identifying initial codes, grouping related codes into themes, reviewing and refining the themes, and interpreting the findings in relation to the research questions and theoretical perspectives. The survey data were analyzed descriptively to provide supporting information about students' responses to gamification across the four questionnaire domains. The survey findings were not treated as an independent measure of effectiveness but were used to complement and contextualize the qualitative findings. Data triangulation was achieved by comparing information obtained from the survey, interviews, and classroom observations, while member checking with the English teacher was used to enhance the credibility of the qualitative interpretation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This section presents the findings of the study according to three interconnected aspects of gamification in English language learning: student perceptions, patterns of game platform use, and the teacher's perspective on gamification as an instructional tool. The findings integrate supporting survey data with qualitative evidence obtained from interviews and classroom observations. This integrated presentation is intended to show not only how students responded to gamified learning activities but also how the English teacher selected and implemented different game-based platforms in classroom practice. The findings also highlight the opportunities and challenges that emerged from the use of gamification across Grades 7, 8, and 9. The presentation begins with students' perceptions of gamification based on the survey responses, as summarized in Table 3.

Student Perceptions of Gamification

The survey findings indicate that students generally responded positively to the use of gamification in English language learning. The responses suggest that gamified activities were associated with students' motivation, enjoyment, participation, vocabulary learning, speaking confidence, and preference for gamified instruction. The strongest response was observed in students' enjoyment of English lessons, while motivation and active participation also received high levels of agreement. However, the responses concerning reduced anxiety when speaking

English were somewhat lower than those related to enjoyment and general engagement, indicating that the affective benefits of gamification may vary across different aspects of language learning. The detailed distribution of student responses to the seven survey statements is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Student Survey Results on Gamification in English Learning

No.	Statement	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)
1	I feel more motivated to learn English when games are used	10%	80%	10%	0%	0%
2	Gamification makes English lessons more enjoyable	10%	90%	0%	0%	0%
3	I understand vocabulary better through game-based activities	0%	80%	20%	0%	0%
4	I participate more actively during gamified lessons	0%	90%	10%	0%	0%
5	I feel less anxious speaking English in game contexts	0%	70%	20%	10%	0%
6	Games help me remember English material longer	0%	80%	10%	10%	0%
7	I prefer gamified lessons over traditional lectures	10%	80%	10%	0%	0%

As shown in Table 3, students expressed positive responses across all seven survey statements. For Item 2, 10% of students strongly agreed and 90% agreed that gamification made English lessons more enjoyable, indicating that all respondents expressed a positive response to the enjoyment dimension. Item 1 also showed a high level of agreement, with 10% strongly agreeing and 80% agreeing that they felt more motivated to learn English when games were used, while 10% remained neutral. Similarly, Item 4 showed that 90% of students agreed that they participated more actively during gamified lessons, with the remaining 10% selecting a neutral response. These findings in Table 3 indicate that enjoyment, motivation, and classroom participation were prominent aspects of students' positive responses to gamification.

The responses in Table 3 also indicate positive perceptions of vocabulary learning and retention through gamified activities. For Item 3, 80% of students agreed that they understood vocabulary better through game-based activities, while 20% expressed a neutral response. Item 6 produced a similar pattern, with 80% agreeing that games helped them remember English material longer, 10% remaining neutral, and 10% disagreeing. These findings suggest that students perceived gamification not only as an enjoyable classroom activity but also as a learning aid that could support their understanding and retention of English material. The relatively small proportion of neutral or negative responses indicates that the perceived learning benefits were generally favorable, although the responses did not demonstrate that all students experienced these benefits to the same extent.

In contrast, the response to Item 5 in Table 3 showed a somewhat lower level of agreement concerning speaking anxiety. Although 70% of students agreed that they felt less anxious speaking English in game contexts, 20% were neutral and 10% disagreed. This pattern differs from the more consistently positive responses concerning enjoyment, motivation, and participation. The result suggests that gamification may create a more comfortable learning atmosphere while not necessarily eliminating anxiety associated with speaking English for all students. The finding was particularly evident among Grade 7 students, who showed relatively higher residual social inhibition when speaking aloud during game-based activities.

The qualitative interviews provided further explanation for the survey patterns presented in Table 3. Student S3 described feeling more comfortable answering questions during Kahoot! activities because the entire class participated in the game together. According to S3, the collective nature of the activity reduced the fear of making mistakes because the student did not feel individually exposed when answering incorrectly. This response provides qualitative support for the positive pattern observed in the survey, particularly in relation to students' motivation and comfort during gamified activities. The finding is also consistent with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, which suggests that reducing emotional barriers such as anxiety and fear of failure can facilitate language acquisition. Taken together, the survey and interview findings suggest that gamification supported students' general engagement and enjoyment, although some students continued to experience inhibition during spoken English activities.

Game Platform Usage Patterns

The classroom observations showed that the English teacher employed several gamification platforms rather than relying on a single digital tool. The platforms served different instructional purposes, including vocabulary practice, warm-up activities, review sessions, reading comprehension, and collaborative learning. Differences were also observed in the frequency with which each platform was used and in students' reported satisfaction with the activities. This variation suggests that the teacher selected gamification platforms according to the characteristics of the learning activity rather than applying the same game format to every lesson. The observed platforms, their frequency of use, targeted language skills, and student satisfaction ratings are summarized in Figure 1.

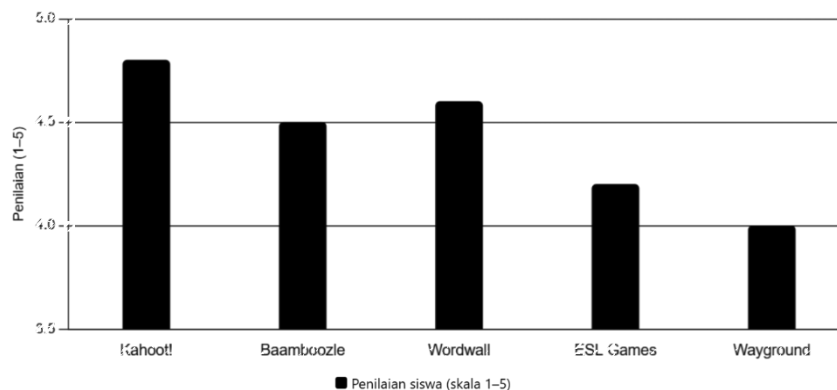


Figure 1. Gamification Platforms Used, Frequency, and Student Ratings

Kahoot! received the highest student satisfaction rating, at 4.8 out of 5, and was also the most frequently used platform during the observation period. The competitive and real-time format was identified as an important feature contributing to students' enthusiasm. Student S7 explained that the anticipation of winning motivated her to study vocabulary before the game sessions and that this preparation helped her remember the vocabulary afterward. This response suggests that the use of Kahoot! extended students' engagement beyond the immediate classroom activity by encouraging preparation for subsequent game sessions. The observation therefore indicates that the platform functioned not only as an in-class engagement tool but also as a potential stimulus for self-directed preparation.

Wordwall also received a high student satisfaction rating of 4.6 out of 5 and was valued for its flexibility across different stages of instruction. The English Teacher reported using Wordwall for both warm-up activities and review sessions, indicating that the platform could be adapted to different instructional purposes. The teacher also explained that vocabulary-matching games could be prepared relatively quickly, making the platform practical for routine classroom use. In addition, students particularly enjoyed the spin-wheel feature because it introduced an element of unpredictability into review activities. These findings indicate that the perceived usefulness of Wordwall was associated with both its instructional flexibility and its practical ease of preparation.

Baamboozle was particularly associated with collaborative and team-based learning activities. The English Teacher observed that students with lower English proficiency appeared more willing to contribute when they participated as members of a team rather than responding individually. The team structure appeared to reduce individual performance pressure and provided opportunities for students to support one another when answering questions. This pattern suggests that the social organization of the game was an important factor in shaping students' participation, not merely the digital platform itself. In this respect, Baamboozle provided a different interactional experience from more individually competitive platforms such as Kahoot!.

Wayground received a slightly lower satisfaction rating of 4.0 out of 5 and was used less frequently than Kahoot!, Wordwall, and Baamboozle. Nevertheless, the English Teacher viewed the platform positively because its immersive narrative scenarios could support deeper reading comprehension. Its relatively limited use was attributed primarily to the longer preparation time required for each session rather than to concerns about its pedagogical value.

This distinction is important because the frequency of platform use appeared to be influenced not only by student satisfaction but also by the teacher's preparation demands. The findings therefore suggest that practical considerations, such as preparation time, can influence the teacher's choice of gamification platform.

Teacher Perspectives on Gamification as an Instructional Tool

The interview with the English Teacher provided further insight into how gamification functioned as an instructional tool in the classroom. Four major themes emerged from the teacher's responses: enhanced student motivation, increased classroom participation, implementation challenges, and pedagogical recommendations. The teacher consistently described gamification as a means of changing classroom dynamics from relatively passive participation toward more active involvement. At the same time, the interview revealed that the implementation of gamification was not free from challenges, particularly in relation to internet stability and students' tendency to focus excessively on winning. The main themes and representative responses from the teacher interview are summarized in Table 4.

Table 4. Summary of Teacher Interview Themes and Responses

Theme	English Teacher (ET)
Motivation	Students show higher enthusiasm and compete positively; class energy increases visibly during game sessions.
Participation	Even shy students become more willing to answer; game formats reduce fear of making mistakes.
Challenges	Internet instability disrupts Kahoot! sessions; some students focus on winning rather than learning.
Recommendations	Combine gamification with structured debriefs; use offline alternatives as backup activities.

As shown in Table 4, the teacher identified motivation and participation as the most visible benefits of gamification. The English Teacher explained that students became more enthusiastic and competed positively during game sessions, while the overall energy of the classroom increased. The teacher also observed that students who were normally quiet or hesitant became more willing to answer when the activity was presented in a game format. These observations indicate that gamification affected not only students' individual motivation but also the overall interactional atmosphere of the classroom.

The findings in Table 4 further show that the teacher perceived gamification as particularly useful for encouraging participation among students who were less confident. The teacher explained that game-based activities created a more psychologically comfortable environment in which students could respond without feeling excessive fear of peer judgment. This observation corresponds with the student interview evidence, particularly S3's explanation that participating in Kahoot! made answering questions feel less threatening because the whole class was involved. The convergence between teacher and student accounts strengthens the finding that gamification may support participation by reducing the perceived pressure associated with individual responses. Thus, the teacher's perspective complements the positive survey pattern regarding student motivation and participation.

At the same time, Table 4 indicates that gamification presented practical and pedagogical challenges. Internet instability was identified by the English Teacher as a major infrastructural problem that could disrupt Kahoot! sessions and interfere with the continuity of classroom activities. The teacher also noted that some students became overly focused on winning and sometimes prioritized answering quickly over thinking carefully about the correct answer. This finding indicates that competitive game mechanics may generate engagement while simultaneously creating a risk of point-chasing behavior. To address this issue, the teacher recommended using post-game debriefing and adjusting platform settings so that answer accuracy receives greater emphasis than speed.

An additional finding from the teacher interview concerned the use of gamification to accommodate differences in students' learning needs. The teacher explained that customizable difficulty settings in platforms such as Wordwall and ESL Games Plus enabled the creation of tiered activities for mixed-ability classes. For example, the teacher prepared simpler vocabulary activities for Grade 7 students and more challenging versions for Grade 8 students while maintaining the same basic game format. According to the teacher, this approach allowed students with different proficiency levels to participate without feeling excluded from the activity. This practice is consistent with Kohnke and Moorhouse's (2022) recommendation that gamification experiences should be adapted to learners' proficiency levels and instructional needs.

Beyond the themes summarized in Table 4, the interview data also revealed an emerging pattern concerning vocabulary learning and self-directed review. Six of the twelve interviewed students (50%) reported that they actively reviewed English vocabulary at home in preparation for upcoming game sessions. Student S9 from Grade 9 explained that after encountering unfamiliar words during Wordwall activities, the student searched for their meanings and reviewed them to perform better in subsequent sessions. This behavior suggests that regular gamification may extend students' engagement with English beyond classroom activities, particularly when students perceive improvement in game performance as personally meaningful. However, because this finding was based on interview reports from six students, it should be interpreted as an emergent qualitative pattern rather than evidence that gamification directly caused autonomous learning among all students.

A further emergent theme concerned the social and collaborative dimensions of gamification. Although competitive formats such as Kahoot! were frequently used, the teacher and students also described team-based platforms such as Baamboozle as creating opportunities for cooperation. The English Teacher observed that team activities encouraged students to negotiate answers, explain their choices, and support peers with lower English proficiency. Student S4 similarly explained that working in teams encouraged students to communicate in English because they needed to agree on an answer together. This finding supports the sociocultural perspective underlying the study, particularly the view that language learning is mediated through interaction with teachers, peers, and learning tools. The emergence of peer-supported language use in team-based gamification suggests that cooperative game structures can provide opportunities for meaningful interaction that may be less visible in conventional teacher-fronted instruction.

Discussion

The findings of this study support and extend existing literature on gamification in EFL education, particularly regarding students' motivation, enjoyment, participation, and perceptions of learning. The generally positive responses reported by students are consistent



with recent systematic evidence indicating that gamification can positively influence students' attitudes, emotional engagement, and English learning outcomes across diverse instructional contexts (Zhang & Hasim, 2023). In the present study, students reported higher motivation and more active participation during gamified lessons, while all students gave positive responses regarding the enjoyment of English lessons. These findings suggest that gamification can create a more engaging classroom environment in which students are more willing to participate in learning activities. However, the positive responses should be interpreted as students' perceptions of gamified learning rather than as direct evidence that gamification alone caused improvements in English proficiency.

The use of specific platforms in this study also corresponds with previous research concerning the pedagogical potential of digital game-based tools. Kahoot! and Wordwall were among the platforms most frequently used by the English teacher and received relatively high student satisfaction ratings, particularly because they provided immediate interaction, competition, and varied activities for vocabulary and language practice. Previous studies have similarly identified Kahoot! and Wordwall as useful tools for reinforcing vocabulary and grammar learning (Alawadhi & Abu-Ayyash, 2021; Katemba et al., 2022; Alfares, 2025). This pattern is further supported by Cancino and Viguera's (2024) quasi-experimental study, which reported improvements in vocabulary learning and vocabulary self-efficacy among young EFL learners following Kahoot!-based instruction. Although the present study did not employ an experimental design to measure learning gains, the students' positive perceptions of vocabulary learning and the qualitative accounts of their engagement with vocabulary activities indicate that these platforms provided meaningful opportunities for language practice.

The affective dimension of gamification is particularly relevant to the junior high school EFL context. In this study, 70% of students reported that they felt less anxious when speaking English in game-based contexts, although 20% remained neutral and 10% disagreed. This finding indicates that gamified activities may provide a more comfortable environment for some students to participate in spoken English, rather than demonstrating that gamification uniformly reduces speaking anxiety. This interpretation is relevant because speaking-related anxiety has been identified as an important factor that can inhibit students' classroom participation and communicative competence in EFL contexts (Nurilahi & Suhartono, 2022). The qualitative interview with S3 also illustrated how the collective nature of Kahoot! made the student more willing to answer and less concerned about making mistakes because the entire class participated in the activity. Thus, the findings suggest that the social and low-stakes characteristics of game-based activities may help some learners feel more comfortable participating in English, although the extent of this benefit may vary across students.

At the same time, the findings reveal that the motivational value of competition needs to be accompanied by appropriate pedagogical scaffolding. The English teacher reported that students became more enthusiastic and active during game sessions, but also observed that some students became overly focused on winning and sometimes answered quickly or guessed rather than concentrating on accuracy. This tension is consistent with systematic mapping of gamification research, which has shown that competitive game elements may produce unintended effects when they are not sufficiently connected to learning objectives, including superficial engagement and increased performance pressure (Almeida et al., 2023). The present finding therefore suggests that competition should not be treated as an end in itself but should be integrated with activities that require students to reflect on their answers and understand the language content being practiced. The teacher's recommendation to conduct post-game debriefing and place greater emphasis on accuracy provides a practical strategy for maintaining



the motivational benefits of competition while keeping the activity aligned with instructional objectives.

The findings also indicate that gamification was used not only to increase motivation but also to accommodate differences in students' English proficiency. The teacher reported using customizable activities and different levels of difficulty so that students could work with content appropriate to their learning levels, such as simpler vocabulary activities for Grade 7 and more challenging content for Grade 8. This use of adaptable game activities suggests that gamification can function as a support for instructional differentiation rather than merely as an engagement strategy. In this context, the value of platforms such as Wordwall lies partly in their flexibility, allowing the teacher to modify content and difficulty while maintaining a similar activity format. Such an approach is consistent with the view that digital learning environments can be adapted to different learner needs when teachers retain an active role in selecting and organizing learning activities (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2022). Therefore, the findings extend the discussion of gamification by showing its potential contribution to differentiated classroom instruction.

The findings can also be interpreted through Self-Determination Theory, which emphasizes autonomy, competence, and relatedness as important psychological needs underlying motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2022). Several patterns in the present study correspond to these dimensions. Students' voluntary preparation of vocabulary before subsequent game sessions may indicate opportunities for autonomous engagement, while team-based activities created opportunities for interaction and peer support that are relevant to the need for relatedness. The visible nature of game participation and immediate feedback may also provide students with information about their performance, although the present study did not directly measure perceived competence or the fulfillment of the three psychological needs. Therefore, Self-Determination Theory provides a useful interpretive framework for understanding the motivational patterns identified in this study rather than direct evidence that all three psychological needs were fully satisfied. This interpretation is consistent with recent meta-analytic evidence indicating that gamification can enhance intrinsic motivation and perceptions of autonomy and relatedness, while its effects on measurable competency gains are more modest and dependent on instructional design quality (Li, Hew, & Du, 2024).

The qualitative findings further indicate that some students extended their engagement with vocabulary beyond the classroom. Six of the twelve interviewed students reported reviewing vocabulary at home in preparation for subsequent game sessions, and S9 explained that unfamiliar words encountered in Wordwall activities were reviewed to perform better in the next session. This pattern suggests that gamified activities may encourage some forms of self-directed preparation beyond scheduled classroom activities. However, because this finding was based on students' interview accounts and the study did not compare their behavior before and after gamification using a longitudinal or experimental design, it should not be interpreted as definitive evidence that gamification caused a behavioral change. Instead, it represents an emergent qualitative pattern suggesting that the anticipation of future game-based activities may provide an additional motivation for some students to review language materials independently. This finding complements the motivational perspective discussed in relation to Self-Determination Theory and demonstrates how students' engagement with gamification may extend beyond immediate classroom participation.

The collaborative interactions observed during team-based game activities provide another important dimension of the findings. While Kahoot! was characterized more strongly by individual competition, Baamboozle created opportunities for students to discuss answers,

negotiate choices, and support peers during team activities. S4 reported that students used English when discussing answers because they needed to reach agreement with their teammates, while the teacher observed that students with higher proficiency sometimes supported classmates who experienced difficulties. These interactions can be interpreted through a sociocultural perspective, which emphasizes that learning is mediated through social interaction, collaboration, and support from others (Alkhudiry, 2022). The observed peer assistance therefore represents an opportunity for scaffolding within classroom interaction, although the present study does not provide sufficient evidence to establish broader gains in communicative competence. Nevertheless, the finding demonstrates that the pedagogical value of gamification may extend beyond individual motivation by creating structured opportunities for peer interaction and collaborative language use.

The infrastructural challenges identified in the study further demonstrate that the effectiveness of gamification depends partly on the conditions in which digital tools are implemented. The English teacher reported that unstable internet connectivity occasionally disrupted game sessions, particularly when using platforms that required continuous online access. Similar technological constraints have been documented in gamified EFL/ESL contexts, where unstable internet connections can interfere with the continuity of digital game-based activities (Chan & Lo, 2024). In response, the teacher prepared offline alternative activities so that learning could continue when technical problems occurred. This adaptive practice is consistent with recommendations that teachers require not only technical familiarity with digital platforms but also contingency strategies for maintaining instructional continuity when technology is unavailable or unreliable (Almeida et al., 2023). Thus, the findings highlight the importance of teacher preparedness and flexible instructional planning when integrating gamification into EFL classrooms.

Overall, the findings indicate that gamification in this study functioned as a teacher-facilitated instructional strategy rather than simply as the use of digital game platforms. Its potential value was reflected in students' positive perceptions of motivation, enjoyment, participation, vocabulary learning, and, for many students, greater comfort in speaking activities. At the instructional level, the teacher used different platforms and activity formats to support vocabulary practice, competition, collaboration, and differentiated learning, while also managing challenges related to internet connectivity and excessive focus on winning. These findings suggest that the pedagogical contribution of gamification depends not only on the platforms themselves but also on how teachers select, adapt, scaffold, and evaluate game-based activities in relation to language-learning objectives. In this sense, the study addresses the role of gamification as an instructional aid by showing that its classroom value emerges through the interaction between game features, teacher facilitation, student responses, and the contextual conditions of the EFL classroom.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that gamification functioned as a teacher-facilitated instructional aid in junior high school EFL classrooms by supporting students' motivation, enjoyment, participation, vocabulary learning, and comfort in English activities. Kahoot!, Wordwall, Baamboozle, and Wayground provided opportunities for practice, competition, collaboration, and differentiated learning across Grades 7 to 9. However, its pedagogical value depended not only on the platforms but also on how teachers integrated them with learning objectives through appropriate preparation, post-game reflection, differentiated activities, and attention to accuracy. The findings also highlight challenges related to unstable internet connectivity and

students' excessive focus on winning, indicating that gamification should complement rather than replace sound pedagogical practices.

This study was limited to one junior high school, one English teacher, and a relatively small student sample, while its descriptive qualitative design supported by survey data did not establish causal effects on English learning outcomes. Future research should involve larger and more diverse school contexts and employ mixed-method, quasi-experimental, or longitudinal designs to examine the effects of gamification on specific language skills and affective outcomes. Further studies may also examine the roles of grade level, proficiency, teacher technological-pedagogical competence, digital literacy, and school infrastructure. In practice, teacher professional development should emphasize purposeful game design, differentiation, competition management, post-game reflection, and alternative activities when technological problems occur.

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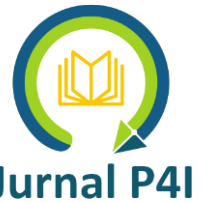


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