

EFL LEARNERS' EXPERIENCES WITH GAME-BASED LEARNING IN AN ENGLISH CLUB CONTEXT AT AKI UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

This study explores the lived experiences of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) university students with Game-Based Learning (GBL) in an informal, extracurricular context within an English club at Universitas AKI. This research addresses a gap in the literature concerning the synergistic effects of combining GBL pedagogy with non-formal learning environments. A qualitative study design was employed, utilizing open-ended questionnaires based on students' experiences, which were subsequently analyzed thematically. Sample taken from seven students club members with limited English proficiency participated in whisper pronunciation games and multiple-choice vocabulary quizzes using Wayground (formerly Quizizz). The results indicate that game-based activities increased motivation, engagement, and confidence among the students. Students reported improvements in pronunciation accuracy and vocabulary recall. These findings align with prior research suggesting that games can create meaningful language contexts and enhance student motivation and skill. Challenges included occasional anxiety and time constraints, echoing findings from other studies on English club activities. Overall, the game-based activities positively affected learning outcomes and student attitudes toward English learning. This study highlights the value of integrating playful learning into EFL clubs and suggests that educators adopt similar activities to boost language engagement.

Keywords: english club, game-based learning, wayground, whisper game.

Introduction

English has become the preeminent language of global communication, scholarship, and international commerce. According to Galan (2026), the number of people worldwide who speak English as a native or second language is projected to reach approximately 1.49 billion by 2026. This staggering figure signals not only the global reach of English but also the urgent pedagogical imperative for educators, particularly those working in non-English-speaking countries, to equip learners with functional communicative competence. Language, however, is far more than a system of grammatical rules and vocabulary lists. Furthermore, as Scarino and Liddiaccoat (Yuhendra, 2018) contend, it serves as a conduit through which human beings perceive, comprehend, and interact with the world around them. This socially embedded conception of language

positions language acquisition as a holistic, experiential process rather than a series of discrete instructional events.

The human species is characterized by its capacity for communicative action, which it undertakes through the medium of language. Even introverted learners must develop English speaking skills to facilitate effective communication in English and to support their acquisition of other competencies (Amalia & Husna, 2020). The acquisition of a second or additional language necessitates the utilization of words, the application of grammatical rules, and the development of linguistic skills. This understanding will facilitate communication. Therefore, it is imperative to ensure that students are adequately prepared to master English. In order to facilitate the acquisition of superficial knowledge, educators must implement

suitable strategies to cultivate students' interest in English vocabulary.

The acquisition of English proficiency can present significant challenges for Indonesian university students, particularly those with lower levels of linguistic competence. Conventional classrooms frequently impede authentic engagement, prompting the establishment of extracurricular English clubs as a supportive framework for supplementary practice (Suryanto et al., 2025). Game-based learning (GBL) has been demonstrated to enhance student engagement and motivation by rendering learning enjoyable and interactive. The integration of gamified learning environments has been demonstrated to elicit a marked shift in student behavior, characterized by a decline in anxiety and an uptick in engagement. This phenomenon, as evidenced by Putera, Z. F., 2023, supports the notion that gamified learning environments can foster deeper participation among students. For instance, systematic reviews have demonstrated that gamified language instruction can effectively reduce learners' anxiety while concurrently enhancing interest, motivation, and engagement (Zhang, S., & Hasim, Z., 2023).

The present study focuses on two specific game-based activities implemented within the English club at Universitas AKI in Semarang, Indonesia. The first is a Whisper Game, also known as Chinese Whispers or Telephone, in which a sentence is passed from one student to the next through whispering, with the final participant attempting to reproduce the original utterance aloud. This activity is well-established as a pronunciation-focused communicative game. The British Council endorses it as a fun and effective technique for practicing articulation and phonemic awareness, and Utami et al. (2018) found that Chinese Whispers games significantly enhanced Indonesian EFL students' speaking ability, particularly in pronunciation accuracy and fluency. The

second activity involves Wayground (formerly Quizizz), an online gamified quiz platform in which students answer multiple-choice vocabulary questions in a competitive, game-like interface. Na'imah (2022) reported that Quizizz-type platforms make language learning "easy and effective" by sustaining students' interest, and Abdel-Rahman (2021) found measurable improvements in EFL learners' vocabulary scores following gamified quiz interventions.

Despite the growing body of research on GBL in EFL classrooms, relatively few studies have examined learner experiences in informal, extracurricular settings specifically. The synergistic potential of combining GBL pedagogy with the low-stakes, community-oriented atmosphere of an English club represents a gap in the literature that this study aims to address. Accordingly, this research investigates the lived experiences of seven EFL students who participated in these game-based activities during their English club meetings at Universitas AKI. Three guiding research questions are explored: (1) How do students experience whisper pronunciation games? (2) How do they experience quiz-based vocabulary practice using Wayground? (3) What benefits and challenges do they perceive from these game-based activities? By foregrounding students' subjective perceptions and employing thematic analysis, this study contributes to discussions on the effective use of GBL in informal EFL contexts and offers practical recommendations for educators and club facilitators.

Methodology

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative research methodology with a qualitative descriptive design to investigate students' perceptions of their involvement in the English club as a tool for improving their communication abilities. A qualitative descriptive design was considered suitable since it emphasizes the exploration of

phenomena from the participants' viewpoints, particularly when the study pertains to subjective experiences like perceptions, emotions, and reflections (Ayton, 2023). As Creswell and Creswell (2023) state, this approach allows researchers to remain close to the data, interpreting responses in a naturalistic and minimally abstract manner. This method aimed to capture authentic narratives and identify emerging themes without imposing heavy theoretical frameworks. Qualitative research emphasizes understanding the meanings that individuals assign to their experiences, and this study aimed to describe how students interact with, benefit from, and are challenged by their involvement in extracurricular English club activities.

Research Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a strategy commonly employed in qualitative research to ensure the inclusion of information-rich cases (Ahmad & Najim, 2020). Purposive sampling involves deliberately selecting individuals who possess direct knowledge of or experience with the phenomenon under investigation. In this study, seven students from various academic majors at Universitas AKI were recruited because they were active members of the English club and satisfied three specific criteria: (1) regular attendance at club meetings, (2) direct participation in both the whisper game and Wayground activities, and (3) willingness to provide written reflections on their experiences. The sample comprised both male and female participants, offering varied perspectives on the challenges and advantages of game-based learning in an EFL club context. To maintain participant confidentiality and anonymity, all individuals were assigned pseudonymous Student IDs throughout the analysis and reporting process. Prior to data collection, formal consent was obtained from the supervising English teacher, and participants were fully informed of the purpose and nature of the

study.

Research Procedure

Participants engaged in two game-based activities across consecutive club meetings. The first activity was the Whisper Game (Chinese Whispers), conducted in teams. The English club committee revealed a sentence written on a piece of paper to the first student in each team, who then whispered it to the next student in the chain. This process continued until the final student, who attempted to reproduce the original sentence aloud. The committee then compared the final utterance with the original to assess pronunciation accuracy. This exercise has been described by the British Council as “fun and effective” for pronunciation practice, and its use in the English club setting provided a communicative, low-stakes context in which students could practice phonemic production without the anxiety of formal evaluation.

The second activity involved Wayground, an online gamified quiz platform. Students accessed the quiz by scanning a barcode displayed on a projector using their personal mobile devices. They then navigated to the Wayground website and answered a series of multiple-choice vocabulary questions. The platform incorporated several gamification elements, including a live leaderboard, time-limited questions, point scoring, and tangible prizes, that were intended to increase engagement and motivation (Ariati & Iswahyuni, 2023; Leligou et al., 2017). The vocabulary items featured in the quiz were drawn from materials previously shared by the committee, ensuring that students had had some prior exposure to the content before the competitive activity began.

Data Collection

Following the completion of both activities, participants were invited to complete an open-ended questionnaire reflecting on their experiences. The questionnaire comprised three core

questions: (1) How did you experience the whisper pronunciation game? (2) How did you experience the quiz-based vocabulary practice? (3) What benefits or challenges did you perceive? Open-ended questionnaires were selected as the primary data collection instrument because they allow participants to articulate their experiences in their own words, generating rich descriptive data well-suited to thematic analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This approach prioritized authenticity of student voice over the imposition of researcher-defined categories.

Data Analysis

Responses were analyzed using thematic coding as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2023). Codes were identified inductively from the data without reference to a predefined coding framework, allowing themes to emerge organically from participants' reported experiences. To ensure trustworthiness and credibility, coded responses were reviewed by English club committee members who were familiar with the activities, and participants were invited to clarify ambiguous or incomplete responses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The final themes were cross-referenced with existing literature on GBL in EFL contexts to situate the findings within the broader scholarly conversation.

Finding and Discussion

Theme 1: Enjoyment and Engagement

The most pervasive finding across all three questionnaire responses was participants' unanimous expression of enjoyment and positive affect toward both game-based activities. Without exception, all seven students described their experiences in affective terms that emphasized fun, interactivity, and engagement. Student 1 captured a particularly nuanced dimension of this enjoyment, remarking that the whisper game was "fun" while also making them "nervous in a good way" because of the cognitive demand to process and reproduce

language quickly. Student 7 described the game as "a mix of fun, challenge, and focus," indicating that the enjoyment was not merely passive entertainment but was intertwined with active attentiveness. Regarding the Wayground quiz, Student 7 elaborated that vocabulary practice "didn't feel boring" and "becomes a game where you learn, compete, and improve at the same time."

These findings are consistent with a substantial body of research demonstrating that game-based activities produce heightened affective engagement in EFL learners. Putera (2023) reported that game-based language learning applications elicited a marked shift in student behavior characterized by increased engagement and reduced disengagement. Zhang and Hasim (2023) similarly found, across their systematic review of gamified EFL and ESL instruction, that students consistently rated gamified activities as more interesting and enjoyable than conventional instructional formats. The concept of "positive nervousness" expressed by Student 1 is theoretically significant: it aligns with Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis in suggesting that a moderate level of arousal, neither debilitating anxiety nor unchallenging monotony, may actually facilitate rather than impede language processing. When learners describe being nervous "in a good way," they are effectively describing the kind of optimal challenge that is associated with a state of flow, in which engagement is sustained at its highest level. This affective dimension of game-based learning is particularly valuable in the informal English club context, where intrinsic motivation and voluntary engagement are the primary drivers of sustained participation.

Theme 2: Pronunciation Development through the Whisper Game

Participants attributed meaningful pronunciation development to their engagement with the whisper game. Student 4 described the activity as "great

for pronunciation practice and knowledge improvement,” and Student 7 reflected that the game required “careful listening and speaking,” suggesting heightened metacognitive attention to phonemic production. Student 1 noted that the activity helped them in improving their pronunciation while also expanding vocabulary, indicating that the benefits of the game were perceived as integrated rather than isolated.

These findings align closely with the existing research literature on the pedagogical value of Chinese Whispers in EFL contexts. Utami et al. (2018) demonstrated that the game significantly enhanced Indonesian EFL students’ speaking ability across dimensions including pronunciation accuracy and fluency. The pedagogical mechanism underlying this improvement lies in the communicative structure of the activity: because meaning transmission depends entirely on the phonemic precision of each participant’s utterance, learners are naturally motivated to articulate sounds as clearly as possible. Errors in pronunciation become immediately evident through the progressive distortion of the whispered message, providing learners with implicit, experiential feedback on their articulation without the evaluation anxiety associated with formal assessments. This form of implicit error correction is consistent with Krashen’s (1982) argument that meaningful, low-anxiety language use promotes acquisition more effectively than explicit error correction.

Theme 3: Vocabulary Acquisition and Retention via Wayground Quizzes

Participants consistently reported positive experiences with the Wayground vocabulary quizzes, emphasizing that the gamified format made vocabulary learning more engaging and effective than conventional study methods. Student 7 provided the most analytically developed reflection, describing the activity as “interactive, fun, and effective,” and noting that “vocabulary practice doesn’t feel

boring, it becomes a game where you learn, compete, and improve at the same time.” Student 1 expressed strong anticipation for the quiz, stating “This is what I’ve been waiting for!” a remark that speaks to the motivational power of anticipated game-based rewards. Even Student 1’s acknowledgment that they were “not really good at it” did not diminish their enjoyment, suggesting that the intrinsic pleasure of participation may offset the competitive disadvantage experienced by weaker learners.

Student 3 offered a particularly reflective observation about the quiz structure, noting that “the material has already been provided by the committee members,” which meant that attentive students could answer all questions correctly. This response indicates an appreciation for the scaffolded design of the activity: by providing prior exposure to vocabulary items before the competitive quiz, the committee reduced the element of arbitrary difficulty and instead rewarded attentiveness and preparation. Student 3 also explicitly endorsed the “group learning approach,” suggesting that collaborative elements within the quiz were valued by participants.

These findings are consistent with research demonstrating the vocabulary acquisition benefits of quiz-based gamification. Na’imah (2022) reported that Quizizz facilitated vocabulary retention by sustaining learner interest through competitive scoring and immediate feedback. Abdel-Rahman (2021) similarly found that Quizizz and Kahoot! significantly improved EFL freshmen’s vocabulary learning outcomes compared to conventional instruction. Tian and Umar’s (2025) systematic review corroborates these findings, reporting that digital game-based vocabulary instruction consistently produced positive effects on both vocabulary scores and learner motivation across a decade of empirical studies. The competitive, time-limited format of Wayground appears to create a context in

which vocabulary items are processed more deeply and retained more effectively, as the pressure of the game environment may encourage stronger encoding of lexical information.

Theme 4: Social Interaction and Collaborative Learning

A theme that emerged prominently from participants' responses, though not prominently addressed in prior literature on game-based learning in EFL clubs, was the social dimension of participation. Students 4 and 5 both explicitly identified social benefits as among the most meaningful outcomes of their English club involvement. Student 4 noted that participation helped them "improve English skills and expand social relations," while Student 5 highlighted "gaining more experience and making new friends" as key benefits. This social orientation toward club participation reflects the fundamentally communal character of the English club as a learning environment.

These responses resonate with Suryanto et al. (2025), who similarly found that English clubs function as platforms not only for linguistic development but also for building interpersonal skills, self-confidence, and 21st-century communicative competencies. The social aspects of English club participation, including the opportunity to meet peers from different academic majors, may be particularly significant in the Indonesian university context, where cross-faculty interaction is often limited. The English club thus appears to serve a dual function: it provides a space for language practice while simultaneously fostering a community of learners who support each other's linguistic and social development.

Theme 5: Challenges and Constraints

While the overall findings were predominantly positive, participants also identified several challenges. These can be grouped into three subcategories: cognitive-linguistic challenges, collaborative challenges, and pedagogical design concerns.

Regarding cognitive-linguistic challenges, Student 1 acknowledged that it was sometimes "hard to catch or spell the words fast," and Student 3 noted that there were "too many words" in the whisper game. These responses suggest that the pace and lexical density of the activities may have occasionally exceeded some participants' processing capacity. For learners with lower proficiency, the rapid succession of unfamiliar vocabulary items, in both the whisper game and the timed quiz, may create cognitive overload that paradoxically impedes the very learning the activity is designed to facilitate.

Regarding collaborative challenges, Student 5 identified "team collaboration" as a challenge, suggesting that coordinating group efforts in the whisper game required interpersonal skills that not all participants possessed equally. This finding is consistent with broader research on collaborative language learning, which indicates that the benefits of group work are contingent on effective group dynamics and shared commitment to the task (Suryanto et al., 2025).

Perhaps the most analytically significant challenge was identified by Student 7, who observed that the Wayground quiz "may focus too much on speed and not enough on deep understanding." This observation represents a nuanced and critical evaluation of the pedagogical design of timed quiz activities. While competitive, time-limited quizzes are effective at sustaining engagement and producing surface-level vocabulary recognition, they may not adequately promote the deeper processing, including semantic analysis, contextual application, and creative use, that is associated with durable vocabulary acquisition (Tian & Umar, 2025). This tension between the engaging features of game mechanics and the demands of meaningful language learning is an important design consideration for educators. Future implementations might address this concern by alternating timed

quiz activities with slower-paced, context-rich vocabulary tasks, ensuring that game-based practice is complemented by activities that require deeper engagement with word meaning.

In summary, the findings of this study confirm that game-based activities in an English club context can significantly foster language practice, affective engagement, and social learning. The whisper game helped participants develop pronunciation awareness in a supportive, communicative environment (Utami et al., 2018), while Wayground quizzes made vocabulary study interactive and memorable (Na'imah, 2022; Abdel-Rahman, 2021). These outcomes are broadly consistent with prior evidence that GBL improves EFL skills, reduces anxiety, and enhances motivation (Zhang & Hasim, 2023). The challenges identified, particularly the speed-comprehension trade-off and team collaboration difficulties, offer actionable guidance for the design of future game-based club activities, suggesting that thoughtful scaffolding and mixed-pace activity design are important considerations for practitioners.

Conclusions

This qualitative study investigated the experiences of seven EFL students who participated in two game-based activities, a whisper pronunciation game and a Wayground vocabulary quiz, within an English club at Universitas AKI, Semarang, Indonesia. Thematic analysis of participants' open-ended questionnaire responses yielded five inductively derived themes: enjoyment and engagement, pronunciation development, vocabulary acquisition, social and collaborative learning, and challenges. Overall, students reported highly positive experiences with both activities, describing them as fun, interactive, and effective vehicles for language practice and skill development.

The findings carry several important pedagogical implications. First, they

suggest that even simple, low-cost game-based activities can generate substantial motivational and linguistic benefits in informal EFL settings. The English club environment, characterized by voluntary participation, peer interaction, and freedom from formal assessment pressure, appears to amplify the positive effects of game-based learning by reducing the affective barriers that often inhibit participation in formal classrooms.

Second, the emergence of social interaction and collaborative learning as a significant theme indicates that game-based English club activities serve functions beyond language acquisition, contributing to learners' social development and sense of community. Educators designing extracurricular language programs should therefore consider the social dimensions of activity design alongside purely linguistic objectives.

Third, the challenges identified by participants, particularly the tension between game speed and depth of comprehension, the cognitive demand of processing unfamiliar vocabulary quickly, and the interpersonal complexity of team collaboration, point to areas in which game-based activities can be refined. Club facilitators are encouraged to calibrate task complexity to participants' proficiency levels, to supplement fast-paced quiz activities with deeper vocabulary engagement tasks, and to provide explicit guidance on collaborative communication strategies to optimize the benefits of team-based games.

Several limitations of this study must be acknowledged. The sample size of seven participants is small, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other EFL club contexts. The reliance on self-reported questionnaire data, while appropriate for exploring subjective experiences, may not fully capture the breadth or nuance of participants' actual learning processes. Furthermore, as a cross-sectional study examining a single

set of game-based activities, the research cannot speak to the long-term effects of sustained GBL engagement on learners' linguistic development.

Future research might address these limitations by employing larger samples, longitudinal designs, or mixed-methods approaches that combine qualitative self-report data with quantitative measures of linguistic performance. Studies comparing game-based and non-game-based English club activities could further illuminate the differential effects of GBL on motivation and skill development. Nonetheless, the present findings provide compelling evidence that integrating playful, game-based learning into EFL club settings is a pedagogically valuable strategy that may help address engagement gaps among struggling learners, ultimately making language learning more enjoyable, social, and effective (Tian & Umar, 2025).

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