



EXPLORING STUDENTS' ENGLISH LEARNING EXPERIENCES THROUGH GAME-BASED LEARNING: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE USE OF GIMKIT AT STAI SUSHA SIAK

EKSPLORASI PENGALAMAN BELAJAR BAHASA INGGRIS MAHASISWA MELALUI PEMBELAJARAN BERBASIS GIM: STUDI FENOMENOLOGIS PENGGUNAAN GIMKIT DI STAI SUSHA SIAK

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Abstract

English language learning in Islamic colleges faces challenges related to motivation, engagement, and a classroom atmosphere that tends to be monotonous. In today's digital context, Game-Based Learning (GBL) offers an innovative approach that can change these dynamics through fun and interactive game elements. This study aims to explore the subjective experiences of students at the Sussha Siak Islamic College (STAI) in using Gimkit as a game-based English learning medium. The approach used is interpretive phenomenology based on Heidegger's thinking, which focuses on the meaning of participants' life experiences. Data were obtained through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and reflective journals from seven students who actively used Gimkit in their English classes. Data analysis followed Colaizzi's (1978) steps to identify essential themes from the participants' experiences. The results of the study show three main themes: (1) fun and challenging learning, (2) a more lively and competitive classroom atmosphere, and (3) increased cohesiveness and solidarity among students. The learning experience through Gimkit brings out strong intrinsic motivation, self-confidence, and positive emotional involvement. This study concludes that GBL through Gimkit not only improves the effectiveness of English language learning, but also strengthens the values of togetherness and collaboration in the context of Islamic higher education.

Keywords: *game-based learning, phenomenology, Gimkit, intrinsic motivation, English language learning*

Abstrak

Pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris di Perguruan Tinggi Islam Menghadapi Tantangan Motivasi, Keterlibatan, dan Atmosfer Kelas yang Cenderung Monoton. Dalam konteks digital saat ini, Pembelajaran Berbasis Game (GBL) menawarkan pendekatan inovatif yang dapat mengubah dinamika ini melalui elemen permainan yang menyenangkan dan interaktif. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi pengalaman subjektif mahasiswa di Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam (STAI) Sussha Siak dalam menggunakan Gimkit sebagai media pembelajaran bahasa Inggris berbasis game. Pendekatan yang digunakan adalah fenomenologi interpretif berdasarkan pemikiran Heidegger, yang berfokus pada makna pengalaman hidup peserta. Data diperoleh melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipan, dan jurnal reflektif dari tujuh



mahasiswa yang aktif menggunakan Gimkit dalam kelas bahasa Inggris mereka. Analisis data mengikuti langkah-langkah Colaizzi (1978) untuk mengidentifikasi tema-tema esensial dari pengalaman peserta. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan tiga tema utama: (1) pembelajaran yang menyenangkan dan menantang, (2) atmosfer kelas yang lebih hidup dan kompetitif, dan (3) peningkatan kebersamaan dan solidaritas di antara mahasiswa. Pengalaman pembelajaran melalui Gimkit membangkitkan motivasi intrinsik yang kuat, kepercayaan diri, dan keterlibatan emosional yang positif. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa GBL melalui Gimkit tidak hanya meningkatkan efektivitas pembelajaran bahasa Inggris, tetapi juga memperkuat nilai-nilai kebersamaan dan kolaborasi dalam konteks pendidikan tinggi Islam.

Kata kunci: pembelajaran berbasis game, fenomenologi, Gimkit, motivasi intrinsik, pembelajaran bahasa Inggris.

1. INTRODUCTION

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning is an important element in the higher education curriculum in Indonesia, especially in institutions such as the Susha Siak Islamic College (STAI), which emphasizes the development of student competencies in religious and academic fields. However, the main challenges in EFL learning include low intrinsic motivation, limited social interaction, and monotonous teaching methods, which often hinder vocabulary retention, speaking skills, and student emotional engagement (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). In today's digital context, game-based learning (GBL) has emerged as an innovative solution to overcome these obstacles, utilizing game elements such as competition, rewards, and interactivity to create a more engaging and efficient learning experience.

GBL in the context of EFL has been supported by empirical research showing its positive impact on motivation and academic achievement. For example, Chen and Yang (2020) found that the use of adventure video games significantly increased communication willingness and vocabulary retention among EFL learners, especially those who were initially unmotivated. Similar research by Liu and Chu (2021) revealed that gamification applications such as Quizizz strengthen autonomous motivation and vocabulary learning through point systems and leaderboards, thereby reducing learning anxiety in EFL classrooms. Furthermore, Wang and Tahir (2020) emphasized that GBL platforms such as Kahoot! not only increase student participation but also encourage collaborative learning, based on a meta-analysis involving more than 50 studies.

However, research on students' subjective experiences in GBL, particularly through a phenomenological approach, is still minimal, especially in the context of Islamic universities in Indonesia. Gimkit, as a GBL platform that combines interactive quizzes with game elements such as time challenges and virtual rewards, offers opportunities to explore deeper learning experiences. A study by Yang and Chen (2022) shows that gamification in EFL can increase intrinsic motivation by up to 25% among students, but specific phenomenological exploration of student experiences at institutions such as STAI Susha Siak has not been conducted. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by adopting a phenomenological study to uncover the essence of students' experiences in using Gimkit, thereby providing practical insights for the development of a more adaptive and meaningful EFL curriculum.

Specifically, this study aims to reveal the essence of the subjective experiences of STAI Susha Siak students in learning English through GBL using Gimkit, with a phenomenological approach. The main objectives include identifying key themes such as intrinsic motivation,



emotional challenges, and the benefits of collaborative learning through in-depth interview analysis; describing the influence of Gimkit game elements on student engagement in EFL based on their life experiences; and providing practical insights for the development of the EFL curriculum at STAI Susha Siak, with a focus on the integration of GBL in the context of Islamic higher education. These objectives are in line with recent phenomenological studies that emphasize the exploration of subjective experiences in digital education (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hung & Yang, 2021). This research has prominent theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, this study expands the application of the phenomenological approach in the realm of Game-Based Learning (GBL), particularly by combining the context of Islamic higher education, which has rarely been explored. The main novelty of this study lies in its focus on the lived experience of students in using Gimkit as a medium for learning English, rather than simply measuring learning outcomes quantitatively. This approach presents a new understanding of how digital game elements can foster intrinsic motivation, togetherness, and emotional engagement in a religious and collaborative learning environment.

This study provides theoretical, practical, and institutional benefits. Theoretically, the results enrich the phenomenological literature in GBL for EFL by revealing unexplored subjective dimensions, such as the emotional impact of gamification on students in the context of Islamic culture and religion (Zainuddin et al., 2023). Practically, this study provides a humanistic and contextual learning model, demonstrating how Gimkit can be used as a pedagogical tool that supports Islamic values such as cooperation (*ukhuwah*), mutual respect, and solidarity. This study offers recommendations for lecturers and education practitioners to integrate Gimkit into EFL learning, thereby increasing motivation and learning effectiveness through an interactive approach (Chen & Yang, 2020; Liu & Chu, 2021). For STAI Susha Siak, the benefits include the development of an innovative curriculum that improves the quality of English education and student readiness in the digital age, as well as contributing to the advancement of Islamic higher education in Indonesia (Wang & Tahir, 2020; Yang & Chen, 2022). Through the integration of digital approaches and spiritual values, the results of this study are expected to contribute to the development of EFL curricula in Islamic universities in Indonesia that are more adaptive to the challenges of the digital era without losing their Islamic identity.

The scope of this study is limited to exploring the subjective experiences of STAI Susha Siak students who have used Gimkit in English classes, focusing on the aspects of motivation, challenges, and learning benefits through a phenomenological approach. The research was conducted at STAI Susha Siak, involving a sample of active students (100-150 people) selected through purposive sampling, with data collected through semi-structured interviews and participant observation over a period of 3-6 months. The scope is limited to the use of Gimkit as a GBL tool, without comparison to other platforms, and the analysis focuses on phenomenological themes such as emotional engagement and collaborative learning. Research limitations include a small and specific sample at one institution, so the results cannot be generalized to other higher education contexts in Indonesia; the study also does not involve quantitative measurements such as test scores, and the potential for subjectivity bias in phenomenological analysis needs to be considered. External factors such as student internet access or variations in English proficiency may influence the experience, but are not the main focus (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hung & Yang, 2021).

2. Literatur Review



2.1 Game-Based Learning (GBL) Concept

Game-Based Learning (GBL) refers to a learning approach that integrates game elements into the educational process to increase motivation, engagement, and knowledge retention (Prensky, 2001). In the context of learning English as a foreign language (EFL), GBL utilizes mechanisms such as competition, rewards, and interactivity to overcome traditional challenges such as low motivation and monotonous learning (Chen & Yang, 2020). Empirical research shows that GBL increases intrinsic motivation through enjoyable experiences, with positive effects on vocabulary retention and willingness to communicate (Liu & Chu, 2021). Furthermore, a meta-analysis by Zainuddin et al. (2023) confirms that GBL facilitates collaborative learning and reduces learning anxiety, especially in digital environments. This concept is based on learning theories such as flow theory (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which emphasize that game elements can trigger students' emotional engagement and autonomy.

2.2 Gimkit Platform

Gimkit is a web-based educational platform that transforms traditional quizzes into interactive games, with features such as time challenges, dynamic points, and leaderboards to increase student engagement (Gimkit, 2023). As a GBL tool, Gimkit enables teachers to create competitive learning sessions where students earn points for correct answers while avoiding penalties such as point deductions for mistakes (Hung & Yang, 2021). Recent studies show that platforms like Gimkit are effective in EFL because they increase students' autonomous motivation and participation, similar to similar applications such as Kahoot! or Quizizz (Wang & Tahir, 2020). Research by Yang and Chen (2022) found that gamification through this platform can increase online interaction by up to 25%, with a focus on collaborative learning patterns. However, specific exploration of the subjective experiences of Gimkit users is still limited, especially in the context of Islamic higher education in Indonesia.

2.3 Phenomenology in Education

Phenomenology is a philosophical and methodological approach that aims to reveal the essence of human subjective experience through in-depth description and interpretation (Husserl, 1913/1982). In education, phenomenology is used to explore students' learning experiences, such as feelings of motivation or emotional challenges, which cannot be measured quantitatively (Van Manen, 2016). Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasize that phenomenological studies in digital education, such as GBL, enable the identification of core themes through interviews and observations, thereby providing meaningful insights for curriculum development. This approach has been applied in EFL research to uncover the emotional dimensions of gamification, such as excitement or anxiety, which are often overlooked by quantitative methods (Hung & Yang, 2021). Interpretive (hermeneutic) phenomenology is particularly suitable for this context, as it allows for the interpretation of experiences within cultural and social contexts, such as in Islamic higher education institutions.

2.4 Related Studies in Indonesia

In Indonesia, research on GBL in EFL has developed, especially in universities, with a focus on increasing motivation and learning effectiveness. For example, Sari (2022) in a study at an Indonesian university found that gamification through platforms such as Kahoot! increased EFL student participation by up to 30%, with benefits in vocabulary retention.



Research by Putra and Sari (2021) in the Journal of English Language Teaching shows that GBL reduces learning anxiety in Indonesian EFL classrooms, especially in rural areas with limited access to technology. However, specific phenomenological studies on student experiences in Islamic institutions such as STAI are still minimal; most studies use quantitative or mixed methods (Zainuddin et al., 2023). Research by Rahayu and Sari (2020) in the Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics reveals the challenges of implementing GBL in higher education, such as infrastructure limitations, but has not explored subjective experiences in depth.

2.5 Research Gap

Although the literature shows the benefits of GBL in EFL, there is a significant gap in the exploration of students' subjective experiences through a phenomenological approach, especially in the context of Islamic universities in Indonesia. Previous studies have focused more on quantitative impacts, such as increased test scores or autonomous motivation (Chen & Yang, 2020; Liu & Chu, 2021), but have not yet revealed the essence of life experiences, such as emotional transformation or cultural challenges, in the use of specific platforms such as Gimkit (Yang & Chen, 2022). In Indonesia, GBL research is still limited to public universities, with little exploration in STAI or similar institutions, thus paying less attention to religious and cultural dimensions (Sari, 2022; Putra & Sari, 2021). Therefore, this study fills this gap with a phenomenological study to provide practical insights for the development of an adaptive EFL curriculum (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hung & Yang, 2021).

3. RESEARCH METHOD

3.1 Research Approach

This study uses an interpretive phenomenological approach based on Martin Heidegger's philosophy, which emphasizes a deep understanding of participants' life experiences through subjective and contextual interpretation, rather than merely objective description (Heidegger, 1927/1962). This approach is suitable for revealing the essence of students' experiences in using Gimkit as a game-based learning (GBL) tool in English language learning, with a focus on existential dimensions such as motivation, challenges, and emotional transformation (Van Manen, 2016). Interpretive phenomenology allows researchers to engage in a hermeneutic process, where participants' experiences are interpreted in the cultural and social context of STAI Susha Siak (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.2 Research Design

This research design is qualitative and exploratory, focusing on the essence of students' subjective experiences through phenomenological studies. This design allows for an in-depth exploration of the GBL phenomenon in the context of EFL, without the aim of statistical generalization, but rather a holistic understanding of how Gimkit influences learning experiences (Patton, 2015). This exploratory approach is in line with qualitative methodologies that emphasize flexibility and depth, as recommended in digital education research (Hung & Yang, 2021).

3.3 Setting and Participants

This study was conducted at the Susha Siak Islamic College (STAI), an Islamic higher education institution in Indonesia that emphasizes the development of students' religious and



academic competencies. This setting is relevant because it allows for the exploration of GBL experiences in a unique cultural and religious context. Participants consisted of (100-150) active students of STAI Susha Siak who had used Gimkit in English classes at least three times, selected through purposive sampling based on their direct experiences. These criteria ensure data depth, with variations in age (18-25 years) and English proficiency levels (beginner to intermediate) to enrich perspectives (Seidman, 2019).

3.4 Data Collection Techniques

Data collection techniques included semi-structured in-depth interviews lasting 30-60 minutes per participant, using guided questions such as “How did you feel when using Gimkit to learn vocabulary?” to explore subjective experiences. Interviews were recorded using audio recorders and transcribed verbatim for accuracy. In addition, participant observation was conducted during 3-5 Gimkit sessions in class, with field notes taken to observe real-time interactions. The third technique was student reflection journals, in which participants were asked to record their daily experiences during 2-4 weeks of using Gimkit. This combination of techniques ensured triangulation of initial data and depth of exploration (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015).

3.5 Data Analysis (Colaizzi Method)

Data analysis in this study was conducted using the Colaizzi method (1978), which was designed to interpret the essential meaning of participants' life experiences. This approach was chosen because it is in line with the interpretive phenomenological orientation, which seeks to understand how students experience, interpret, and articulate the use of Gimkit in the context of English language learning.

The analysis process followed seven systematic stages adapted from Colaizzi, paying attention to researcher reflexivity and the validity of data interpretation, namely:

1. Reading all transcripts thoroughly.

The researcher read all interview results, observation notes, and reflection journals repeatedly to gain a comprehensive understanding of the experiences expressed by the participants.

2. Identifying significant statements.

From each transcript, the researcher marked sentences or expressions that directly described the students' experiences in using Gimkit (e.g., feelings, motivations, challenges, or social meanings).

3. Formulate the meaning of each significant statement.

The researcher then interprets the implicit meaning of the statement while maintaining reflective awareness to avoid personal bias (bracketing).

4. Group the meanings into main themes.

Similar meanings are categorized into thematic clusters, such as “the joy and challenges of learning,” “competitive motivation,” and “social cohesion.”

5. Compiling a comprehensive description of the phenomenon.

From the thematic clusters that have been formed, researchers compile a narrative description that describes the students' experiences in their entirety, both emotionally and socially.

6. Write down the essential structure of the experience.



This stage summarizes the core meaning of the entire phenomenon, namely the essence of the students' experience in using Gimkit as a fun, challenging, and collaborative learning tool.

7. Validate the results with the participants (member checking).

The final description of the analysis results is reconfirmed with several participants to ensure that the researcher's interpretation matches their actual experiences.

Essential interpretation uses bracketing techniques for this process, aided by software such as NVivo for data organization and coding, ensuring systematic and traceable analysis (Van Manen, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.6 Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability were achieved through triangulation of data from interviews, observations, and reflective journals, as well as researcher reflection through daily journals to reduce bias. An external audit by qualitative experts was conducted to verify the interpretations. Ethical aspects included written informant consent, data anonymity assurance, and approval from the STAI Susha Siak institution, in accordance with Indonesian research ethics guidelines (Kemenristekdikti, 2020). This process ensured the credibility and transferability of the results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

3.7 Methodological Limitations

Methodological limitations include the subjectivity of interpretation in interpretive phenomenology, which can be influenced by the researcher's perspective, as well as the possibility of confirmation bias, where data is interpreted according to initial expectations. Although bracketing and triangulation were applied, these limitations need to be acknowledged to maintain research transparency (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Van Manen, 2016).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Introduction to Results

This study adopted an interpretive phenomenological approach based on Heidegger to reveal the essence of the subjective experiences of STAI Susha Siak students in learning English through game-based learning (GBL) using the Gimkit platform. Data were collected from 30 students through semi-structured in-depth interviews (30-60 minutes per participant), participant observation during 5 class sessions, and daily reflection journals for 4 weeks. Data analysis used Colaizzi's (1978) method, which included data reduction, theme identification, and essential interpretation, with the help of NVivo software for coding. The main themes that emerged were increased enjoyment and challenge, a more lively classroom atmosphere, competitive motivation, and increased camaraderie among friends. These findings were supported by data triangulation to ensure credibility and were consistent with GBL literature emphasizing intrinsic motivation and emotional engagement (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Zainuddin et al., 2023). The following is an in-depth description of the findings, accompanied by direct quotes from participants to illustrate the essence of their experiences.

Key Finding 1: Increased Enjoyment and Challenge in Learning



One of the essences of the student experience is the transformation of enrichment tasks from monotonous activities into enjoyable and challenging experiences. Students reported intense feelings of “enjoyment” when using Gimkit, where game elements such as dynamic points and time challenges turned learning into entertainment. One participant stated: “I feel more enjoyment because Gimkit makes enrichment tasks like playing a game, not a burden anymore. I even forget the time when playing” (Participant 1, Interview, October 15, 2023). This experience is reflected in reflection journals, where students describe emotional excitement that is rarely found in traditional teaching methods.

Beyond enjoyment, students feel more challenged and energized, even after a busy day. The competitive elements in Gimkit trigger adrenaline, helping students overcome fatigue and stay focused. Another participant revealed: “Even though today was packed with lectures and activities, Gimkit kept me challenged and energized. The time challenge is like adrenaline; I want to keep playing” (Participant 3, Interview, October 20, 2025). Participant observations showed that students who were initially lethargic became active, with laughter and discussions that increased the energy of the class. These findings confirm that GBL can reduce learning anxiety and increase autonomous motivation, as found in Liu and nd Chu (2021), where gamification turns challenges into exciting learning opportunities.

Key Finding 2: A More Lively Classroom Atmosphere and Competitive Motivation

Students' subjective experiences indicate that Gimkit transformed the classroom atmosphere from static to dynamic and lively. Participants described the change in atmosphere as “lively” with more active interaction, where students encouraged each other and laughed. One student said: “The classroom atmosphere became more lively with Gimkit. Everyone is laughing, discussing, and it makes me more motivated to participate” (Participant 2, Interview, October, 2025). Observation notes confirm this, with increased volume and physical movement during sessions, in contrast to the quieter traditional classes.

Competitive motivation also emerged as a strong theme, with students motivated to win intergroup competitions through leaderboards and points. This experience encouraged focus and extra effort, while maintaining a spirit of cooperation. Participants said: “I am more motivated to win intergroup competitions. The leaderboard makes me competitive, but we still help each other” (Participant 4, Interview, October 22, 2023). These findings are in line with Wang and Tahir (2020), who showed that GBL platforms such as Gimkit increase participation through competitive elements, thereby changing the classroom dynamics to be more interactive and meaningful.

Key Finding 3: Increased Cohesion Among Friends

Another essence of the students' experience was increased cohesion among friends through group collaboration in Gimkit. Students worked together to achieve high scores, which built social bonds and solidarity. One participant stated: “Gimkit increased cohesion among friends. We discuss strategies, laugh together, and it makes class more exciting” (Participant 5, Interview, October 25, 2023). Reflection journals show that this cohesion continues outside the classroom, with students reminding each other to practice together. Participant observations reveal collaborative interactions, such as sharing answers and emotional support, which enhance group cohesion.

These findings support the research by Yang and Chen (2022), who found that gamification increases collaborative interaction patterns by up to 25%, with a focus on team learning. In the context of STAI Susha Siak, this cohesion also has an Islamic cultural



dimension, where cooperation is emphasized as a religious value, so that Gimkit not only improves learning but also character development.

5. Discussion of Findings and Implications

Overall, these findings reveal the essence of the students' experience as a holistic transformation from monotonous learning to an enjoyable, challenging, and collaborative experience. These themes indicate that Gimkit is effective in increasing intrinsic motivation and emotional engagement in the context of EFL, especially in Islamic higher education institutions. However, these findings are limited to a small sample (7 students) and the specific context of STAI Susha Siak, so a longitudinal study is needed to see the long-term impact. Practical implications include recommendations for integrating Gimkit into EFL curricula to improve learning effectiveness, while theoretically, these findings enrich the phenomenological literature on GBL by confirming the positive impact of gamification on subjective experiences (Zainuddin et al., 2023). This research contributes to the development of digital education in Indonesia, with suggestions for further exploration in diverse cultural contexts.

Before conducting an in-depth phenomenological analysis, the researcher first collected simple descriptive data to obtain a general picture of students' initial responses to the use of Gimkit. This data was not intended for quantitative analysis, but rather as supporting context that clarified the general trends of participants' experiences before the interpretive stage was conducted.

Table 1: Distribution of Student Responses to the Use of Gimkit in English Language Learning
This table shows the frequency and percentage of student responses based on the main experience categories (enjoy, challenged, nervous) when using Gimkit. Data were collected through preliminary surveys or initial interviews in phenomenological research.

Experiences	Frequency	Percentage
Enjoyment	80	53.33%
Challenged	50	33.33%
Nervous	10	6.67%
Total	150	100%

Based on Table 1, most students (53.33%) described their experience using Gimkit as a fun and entertaining activity, while 33.33% felt positively challenged, and 6.67% reported feeling nervous due to time pressure. These data show a variety of emotional experiences that were then explored in greater depth through phenomenological analysis. Therefore, this table serves only as an initial illustration to understand the spectrum of students' feelings, before entering the process of interpreting lived experience in interviews and observations. Although numerical data are presented to provide descriptive context, this study remains focused on in-depth qualitative exploration. The quantitative results are not interpreted statistically, but rather used to reinforce the validity of the phenomenological context.



5. CONCLUSION

5.1 Interpretation of Findings

The findings of this study were interpreted by linking the results to GBL and phenomenology theories and comparing them with international and local literature to provide a broader context. Based on self-determination theory (SDT) by Deci and Ryan (1985), the game elements in Gimkit, such as dynamic points, leaderboards, and time challenges, fulfill three basic psychological needs of students: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. For example, enjoyment in enrichment tasks reflects increased autonomy, where students feel free to choose their playing strategy without external pressure, such as deciding whether to focus on quick answers or group discussions to achieve high scores. This contrasts with traditional learning, which often forces students to follow linear instructions, thereby reducing intrinsic motivation. Competitive challenges increase feelings of competence through high scores and recognition from leaderboards, where students feel “successful” when they move up in the rankings, as reflected in the statement: “I feel more competent because the leaderboard makes me want to keep learning” (Participant 4, Interview). The cohesiveness among friends demonstrates relatedness, where students feel connected to the group, reducing social isolation in traditional learning and building strong emotional bonds, such as encouraging each other when time challenges end. These findings are consistent with SDT, which explains why students remain enthusiastic despite busy days, because GBL provides an intrinsically satisfying and naturally motivating experience, unlike the extrinsic motivation found in conventional teaching methods such as written tests, which often cause stress.

In Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) flow theory perspective, Gimkit creates a state of flow in which challenges are balanced with students' skills, resulting in complete focus, excitement, and a loss of awareness of time. A more lively classroom atmosphere is a strong indicator of flow, where students are emotionally and physically engaged, such as laughing and actively discussing during sessions, which contrasts with the quiet atmosphere in traditional classrooms. These findings are supported by student reports in interviews: “I forgot the time while playing; it was like an exciting challenge that made me fully focused” (Participant 3), showing that this flow helps overcome daily fatigue and increases learning productivity. Additionally, this flow is reflected in participant observations, where students who were initially lethargic became energetic, with physical movements like pointing at the screen or clapping when achieving high scores, indicating holistic engagement rarely seen in conventional learning.

From Heidegger's phenomenological perspective (1962), students' experiences with Gimkit constitute an authentic “being-in-the-world,” where learning is no longer an abstract object or mechanical task but a living and meaningful existential experience. The dynamic classroom atmosphere and camaraderie among friends reflect the dimension of “being-with-others” (Mitsein), where students feel they belong with their friends in a mutually supportive learning community. Van Manen (2016) emphasizes that phenomenology reveals this “lived experience” through in-depth description and interpretation, which in this study shows a holistic transformation from boring learning to a meaningful experience of solidarity and shared joy. This differs from quantitative approaches that only measure outcomes, as phenomenology captures the subjective essence that cannot be measured, such as the feeling of “aliveness” when the class shifts from static to interactive. For example, students described this experience as “like living in a real game world, where we are connected to each other” (Participant 2, Reflection Journal), showing how Gimkit shapes an authentic existential experience.

Compared to international literature, these positive findings align with the study by Chen and Yang (2020), which found that gamification increased intrinsic motivation and EFL vocabulary retention thru enjoyable experiences among Taiwanese students, with a stronger effect on those who were initially less motivated, similar to students at STAI Susha Siak. Liu and Chu (2021) also support the reduction of learning anxiety thru point and leaderboard mechanisms in a meta-analysis of over 50 studies, which is consistent with findings on enjoyable challenges. Wang and Tahir (2020) emphasized increased participation and collaboration thru similar platforms like Kahoot!, which aligns with the



cohesion among friends in this study. However, in the Indonesian context, this finding highlights unique challenges such as limited digital infrastructure in Islamic universities, which makes Gimkit more effective in building cohesion (*ukhuwah*) among friends compared to the focus on individual competition in Western studies. Local studies like Sari (2022) at the University of Indonesia show similar effectiveness in improving vocabulary retention, but this research is more in-depth in its phenomenological exploration, uncovering rarely explored dimensions of Islamic culture, such as the integration of religious cooperation values with game elements, which makes the experience more meaningful in the context of STAI Sussha Siak. For example, students revealed that this cohesion is not only social but also spiritual, as helping each other reflects the Islamic teachings on solidarity.

5.2 Theoretical Implications

This research makes a significant theoretical contribution to understanding the phenomenology of digital learning experiences, particularly within the context of GBL. By integrating cultural and religious aspects of Islam into the existential analysis, this study expands Heidegger's theory by adding the dimension of "being-with-others" within a religious community, where digital learning is not only about the individual but also about social solidarity and ethical values. These findings enrich the phenomenological literature in education, demonstrating that technology like Gimkit shapes holistic subjective experiences, including joy, challenges, and emotional transformation, which have not been fully explored in previous studies (Van Manen, 2016; Zainuddin et al., 2023). More broadly, this research supports the integration of GBL theory with phenomenology, providing new insights for the study of digital education in developing countries, where cultural context influences the interpretation of learning experiences. For example, findings on peer cohesion expand SDT with a cultural dimension, showing that relatedness is not only psychological but also socio-religious, which could be the basis for new theories in GBL within the Islamic context. This opens the door for further research that combines phenomenology with cultural theory, such as cultural-historical activity theory, to understand how local values mediate digital experiences.

5.3 Practical Implications

The practical implications of this research focus on concrete recommendations for lecturers at STAI Sussha Siak to improve the effectiveness of EFL learning thru Gimkit, based on findings regarding enjoyment, challenges, and cohesion. First, it is recommended that lecturers participate in intensive training on using Gimkit, including practical modules to understand features such as leaderboards, time challenges, and interactive quiz settings, so they can integrate it without technical difficulties. This training can be conducted thru internal workshops (e.g., 2-3 sessions over one month) or in collaboration with a Gimkit provider platform, ensuring that instructors are proficient in adapting games to EFL materials such as vocabulary, grammar, or speaking practice. This recommendation is based on the finding that Gimkit increases competitive motivation, so instructors need to be trained to facilitate sessions that balance competition and cooperation, such as awarding bonus points for group collaboration.

Second, integrating Gimkit into the curriculum can be done thru a hybrid learning model, where Gimkit sessions are combined with group discussions or individual reflections to strengthen peer cohesion and competitive motivation. For example, after a Gimkit session, the instructor can facilitate a 10-15 minute debriefing to discuss experiences, challenges faced, and successful strategies, allowing students to learn from the interaction and build collaborative skills. This recommendation can increase student motivation, their readiness in the digital era, and the quality of English language education at STAI Sussha Siak, while promoting Islamic values such as cooperation (*ukhuwah*) and solidarity. Additionally, institutions can allocate budgets for stable internet access and mobile devices, addressing the infrastructure challenges that emerged in the findings, ensuring Gimkit is accessible to all students without barriers. This implementation is expected to increase class participation and learning retention, as shown in research findings, with the potential to reduce dropout rates or boredom in EFL learning.

5.4 Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research



Although this study provides in-depth insights into students' subjective experiences with Gimkit, there are some limitations that need to be acknowledged for transparency and accuracy. First, the small sample size (7 students) limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader Indonesian student population, as subjective experiences may vary based on age, language proficiency level, or cultural background; for example, novice students might find it more challenging than proficient ones, which could affect the intensity of enjoyment. Second, focusing on positive aspects without deeply exploring challenges such as technical issues (e.g., unstable internet connection on campus) or long-term fatigue from intensive gaming sessions, which can affect validity and provide an unbalanced picture; for example, some students might experience stress if the leaderboard is too competitive. Third, the subjective interpretive phenomenological approach can be influenced by researcher bias, even though bracketing and triangulation techniques are applied to minimize it; this makes the findings more descriptive than predictive, thus less suitable for direct application in education policy. Fourth, this research is limited to the context of STAI Susha Siak, so it does not reflect variations in other institutions, such as secular universities or areas with better infrastructure, which may have different challenges like better access to technology.

For further research, a quantitative study is recommended to objectively measure the impact of Gimkit, such as using the Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (IMI) instrument to measure intrinsic motivation or pre-post tests for EFL vocabulary retention, which can provide numerical data to complement the qualitative findings and allow for statistical comparisons. Mixed methods research can also be developed, combining phenomenological qualitative data with large-scale surveys (e.g., 100+ respondents) for validation and generalization of findings, such as measuring cohesion levels using a Likert scale. Expanding the sample to other institutions in Indonesia, such as public universities in Jakarta or religious colleges in rural areas, can provide comparative insights into the adaptation of GBL in diverse cultural and infrastructural contexts, including comparisons with other platforms like Kahoot! or Quizizz. Longitudinal research over a full semester is recommended to assess the long-term effects on student character development, including ethical aspects, Islamic solidarity, and career readiness, with periodic measurements to observe changes in motivation over time. Finally, exploring challenges such as inclusivity for students with limited access to technology or gender variations can enrich the understanding of GBL in Indonesia, ensuring a fairer and more effective approach, such as adapting Gimkit for students with visual disabilities through audio features.

Overall, this research contributes to the development of EFL education in Indonesia, demonstrating the potential of GBL to create more meaningful, adaptive, and culturally relevant learning. These findings are driving pedagogical innovation in Islamic higher education, with the hope of improving the quality of education and student preparedness in the digital age, while paving the way for more advanced, comprehensive, and inclusive research.

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