The Implementation of Gamified TBLT Strategy among Malaysian Secondary ESL Students

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Abstract
This study explores how the implementation of a gamified Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) strategy influences students' engagement and participation in Malaysian secondary English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms, while also investigating the challenges ESL teachers face when applying this strategy in their classrooms. This study adopts a qualitative research approach, using two data collection instruments: an open-ended survey involving 40 lower secondary ESL students, and semi-structured interviews with five ESL teachers from different schools. These instruments were chosen to capture the students' experiences and teachers' perspectives in depth. All the collected data after the implementation of gamified TBLT strategies during three lessons were analysed through thematic analysis, which helps the researcher to systematically identify key themes related to student participation and teacher challenges. The findings reveal that gamified TBLT enhanced student engagement, motivation, confidence, and interaction during English lessons, as evidenced by student reports of increased enthusiasm and teachers' observations of more active communication. However, teachers also faced challenges related to time constraints, resource limitations, classroom management, and limited practical training. The findings suggest that while gamified TBLT is effective in promoting active student participation, its successful implementation depends on contextual support and teacher readiness. This study provides qualitative evidence supporting the integration of gamification into task-based ESL instruction in secondary school context.
Keywords: Gamified TBLT, Gamification, TBLT, ESL Classrooms, Student Participation

Introduction
Around the world, English continues to function as an important language for academic mobility, to communicate internationally, and take part in the global economy. Aiming to equip students for the challenges, many education systems are now focusing on teaching methods that are student-centred and encourage communication. English remains as an important subject that is compulsory for all students of all levels in Malaysian schools to take, proving that Malaysia is committed to equip students with essential language skills for the modern connected world (Ramakrishnan et al., 2025). To keep up with the 21st-century education goals, recent changes put more focus on teaching strategies that involve students actively and make learning more engaging for them (Ramakrishnan et al., 2025). These

teaching strategies shift from teacher-centred towards student-centred approaches such as TBLT, which helps students learn by doing meaningful student-centred tasks and using language in real-life situations (Albarqi, 2024). This study integrates gamification approach to complement TBLT which involves adding game elements like points, challenges, badges, and leaderboards to the tasks to make learning more enjoyable and less intimidating (Jalim & Ngui, 2025). Similarly, Yang et al. (2025) found that incorporating game-like elements to regular tasks helps secondary students with lower English proficiency feel more motivated and participate during lessons.

Ideally, every student should have equal opportunity to participate actively in English lessons. They should voluntarily take part in activities, ask questions, work on tasks collaboratively, and show interest in learning the language. However, reports suggest that many students feel nervous about using English in class because they are scared of making mistakes or being judged. Sa'ud et al. (2025) found that students often stayed passive, anxious, or hesitated to use English during discussions. Similarly, Boonorm & Phusawisot (2025) found that 73% of students showed moderate levels of "unwillingness to communicate". Many students also have low motivation due to lack of interest, fear of failure, and boring teaching methods (Pathan et al., 2025). Hence, in a classroom with students who are comfortable with technology, the gamified TBLT strategy might be a great solution as a gamified learning environment keeps students actively engaged and focused by giving them challenges that provide a sense of achievement (Laksanasut, 2025). These issues with student participation highlight the importance of teaching methods that foster supportive and low-pressure environments, allowing students to feel comfortable using English. Strategies that boost motivation, reduce anxiety, and provide meaningful interaction could be beneficial for Malaysian secondary ESL students.

Although TBLT and gamification have been explored in ESL and EFL contexts, there is still limited research that integrates these methods in Malaysian secondary classrooms. Existing studies frequently focus on university students and the use of digital platforms. Only a few investigate the impact of gamified TBLT on the participation of students with low to moderate proficiency levels. By analysing the research findings on how a gamified TBLT strategy affects students' participation and understanding the challenges that teachers face, this study may provide useful insights and implications for teachers facing similar issues in similar contexts. If the findings of this study prove that the implementation of a gamified TBLT strategy can improve student engagement, teachers may consider adopting this approach in their classrooms to create a more interactive learning environment. Additionally, policymakers and schools may explore the interventions that can be implemented to address the challenges that this study found teachers face when implementing this gamified TBLT strategy in their classrooms. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on the integration of gamification and TBLT to encourage classroom participation among Malaysian ESL students, especially those with lower proficiency levels. The purpose of this study is to study the effectiveness of a gamified TBLT strategy on students' participation in ESL classrooms, while also addressing the challenges teachers faced when implementing a gamified TBLT strategy in secondary ESL classrooms. The research questions that this study aims to address are as follows: (1) how does a gamified TBLT strategy affect students' participation in ESL classrooms? (2) what are the challenges teachers face when implementing a gamified TBLT strategy in secondary ESL classrooms?

Literature Review

Task-Based Language Teaching in ESL Context

A study by Zhao (2024) revealed that university EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers consider TBLT as a tool "to develop students' communication skills" and a student-centred approach that highlights participation, collaboration and interest in reading tasks. This is in line with the study by Xie and Lan (2025) that shows how TBLT improves students' communication skills in speaking, listening, vocabulary, and overall language proficiency. The same study also found that TBLT effectively improves students' fluency, accuracy, and ability to use the language in real-life communication tasks with confidence.

Gamification in ELT

Gamification can be defined as incorporating gaming elements and mechanics into contexts that are not traditionally associated with gaming in order to create a learning environment that is engaging and immersive which will improve students' motivation and promote active participation (Abu Qub'a et al., 2024). This is in line with how Siregar and Degeng (2025) in their study focusing on teachers' views, show that most pre-service teachers regard gamification as a positive approach as 89% of them reported that there is improvement in engagement, and 85% reported improvement in motivation and focus. From a systematic review conducted by Zhang and Hasim (2023), digital gamified tools are found to have the ability to help students in improving their English skills performance and proficiency level, on top of providing support on authentic and encouraging surroundings for ESL/EFL lessons. De La Cruz et al., (2023) similarly discovered that competition increased engagement and fun especially in conjunction with rewards and feedback. These findings allow that gamification be concluded as a technique that promotes engagement and motivation, while supporting personalised self-paced learning among students.

Research Gaps

The studies on TBLT reveal that there are also significant limitations of TBLT highlighted by Zhou and Deocampo (2023) such as reading and writing activities outcomes were weaker as the "reading abilities" and "writing abilities" showed only moderate gain from the results, underlining that students' reading skills should be improved and learning strategies shall be supported. Moreover, Ng et al. (2025) found that students struggle with understanding instructions in English and tend to rely on their first language (L1) when completing the tasks, in addition to facing challenges such as anxiety, lack of confidence, and grammatical errors, which disrupt the implementation of TBLT. On top of that, Zhao (2024) states that some teachers misunderstood the 'tasks' concept and took exercises and homework as tasks. They also disregarded the teaching of grammar, with the assumption that students would learn grammar on their own, although grammar must be taught contextually in TBLT lessons. Xie and Lan (2025) thus underlined that the effectiveness of TBLT is affected by cultural expectations, institutional policies, and teacher training, on top of ensuring that TBLT is appropriately adapted to meet various educational contexts.

Studies on gamification also share some gaps and challenges of implementing this approach. The research by Abu Qub'a et al. (2024) underlined that there are needs for further research on the long-term effects of implementing gamification techniques and the best way to design learning activities so that the technique works effectively for different language skills. Some pre-service teachers also perceive gamification as an approach that is more exclusive for skills

such as grammar and writing which are more complicated. Abu Qub'a et al. (2024) also discussed challenges such as insufficiency in infrastructure, pre-service knowledge, and the willingness to adopt the technology in lessons. Similarly, the study by Zhang and Hasim (2023) suggests that studies on specific productive skills and on low proficiency students are still relatively not developed enough although the gamification approach has proven to encourage students' motivation and engagement across skills.

Theoretical Framework: Sociocultural Theory and Behaviourist Theory
In the education field, the significance of learning theories lies in their role in shaping a high-quality learning process. Defined as conceptual frameworks, learning theories govern the acquisition, processing, and retention of knowledge during the learning journey (Sasan and Rabillas, 2022). The two main approaches that are integrated in this study are related to two major learning theories which are sociocultural theory and behaviourist theory. Gamified TBLT strategy is interconnected with the sociocultural theory by Vygotsky which is a theory that explains how people learn languages by interacting with others, working together, and getting help from teachers and fellow students. In accordance with Vygotsky's theory of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), students make progress when they are given the opportunity to complete activities with the assistance of a teacher that they are unable to complete on their own (Jeong et al., 2022). The gamified TBLT strategy correlates with the theory as it encourages students to work together to complete the tasks, as they will discuss what it means, help each other, and interact with each other in English. Due to the fact that meaning is mediated through social interaction, this peer-supported collaboration is an essential component of the sociocultural theory learning mechanism according to Jeong et al. (2022). Other than that, the correlation can be seen from the role of a teacher who will circulate in the classroom and provide linguistic scaffolding in the form of helping students while the students are trying to complete their tasks. This is consistent with sociocultural theory research that proves that language learning performance is greatly enhanced by scaffolded support (Sarmiento-Campos et al., 2022).

Gamification of TBLT also allows students to be rewarded for their effort and accomplishment, which is related to behaviourist theory that explains learning as a process that occurs through reinforcement and rewards, where repeated behaviours are strengthened by positive outcomes (Skinner, 1953). In gamified learning environments, this principle is applied through the use of game elements such as points, badges, and leaderboards, which function as external rewards for task completion. Recent studies on educational gamification have shown that these reward mechanisms encourage learners to remain engaged and to repeatedly participate in learning activities (Angwaomaodoko, 2025). Similarly, research on gamification practices highlights that reinforcement-based game elements are effective in sustaining learner involvement and motivating continued effort, particularly in structured classroom tasks (Kode, 2025). When integrated into TBLT, these behaviourist reinforcement mechanisms help encourage students to participate more actively in tasks by rewarding effort and engagement rather than focusing solely on linguistic accuracy. Together, this theory and gamification research provide a clear conceptual basis for understanding how a gamified TBLT approach may increase student participation in ESL classrooms.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design, to investigate how a gamified TBLT strategy is used among Malaysian secondary ESL students. A qualitative approach was chosen as it helps the researcher to understand people's descriptive experiences and interactions, which capture the complexity that numbers or statistics do not provide (Chand, 2025). This makes it a suitable approach to understand classroom experiences like engagement and participation.

Research Participants

The study utilised the non-probability sampling to pick the participants, mainly because of convenience and the researchers' professional network. It is a helpful method as it lets the researcher collect data from people who are easily accessible and available, which is more practical, especially when researchers are short on time, resources, or have difficulty to reach a larger population (Golzar et al., 2022). This sampling method was chosen to address RQ1 because the researchers taught the participants which made it possible to meet them regularly during school days. The student group involved 40 Malaysian lower secondary students from where the researchers taught, specifically Form 2 and Form 3 students. These students were learning English as a second language and had low to moderate proficiency level, as assessed by their performance in the classroom and their teachers' evaluations. With the school administration approval, the researchers had 40 students randomly selected by drawing names from a list of volunteers. This random selection within a convenience group helped reduce selection bias while still benefiting the accessible setting, as it limits researcher's influence in choosing the participants (Noor et al., 2022).

To address RQ2, the researchers employed a purposive network sampling and involved researchers' former classmates and colleagues who are now working as English teachers in secondary schools. This cost-effective and time-saving method allows researchers to choose participants who have valuable knowledge, experience, or expertise related to the study, such as via professional or social networks (Tajik et al., 2025). Five teachers consented to participate in the study, making up the teacher group. The teachers were selected based on familiarity and their willingness to share their professional knowledge, there were no specific requirements. All five teachers could be reached online, making it possible for researchers to arrange interviews. Both methods applied on the student and teacher groups focused on practicality and accessibility, which were suitable for a small-scale mixed-methods study like this.

Research Instruments

To understand how the students perceived the gamified TBLT strategy and the challenges teachers face when implementing it, this study employed two qualitative methods: an open-ended survey for the student group, and interview for the teacher group. To address RQ1, the researcher developed a nine-question survey that was adapted from Ramzan et. al, (2024), Nilubol et. al., (2025), Anane (2024), and Chun and Sathappan (2023), and was checked by an experienced lecturer to ensure the language was clear and suitable for secondary students. It was prepared for 40 selected students, focusing on three categories that investigate how they feel about engaging, participating, and their perceptions on the gamified TBLT lessons. It allows researchers to find reasonable explanations straight from the participants, which is

helpful when people act or think unexpectedly (Haaland et al., 2025). Haaland et al. (2025) also elaborated that unlike questions with set answers, open-ended questions do not lead people towards specific responses.

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with five ESL teachers to gather detailed qualitative insights and address RQ2. These interviews were guided by six open-ended questions that were adapted from previous studies by Ramzan et al. (2024), Zhao (2024), Dhayalan & Mohamad Nasri (2025), and Bacsa-Károlyi & Fehérvári (2024). The questions were designed to explore the teachers' personal experiences and opinions on the use of gamified TBLT. By interviewing the teachers, the researcher can dive deep into what participants think, experience, and mean, especially when they ask more questions, get clarifications, and explore new topics as the conversation goes on (Chand, 2025). All the responses from the interviews were transcribed and then analysed thematically.

Research Procedures
This study was conducted in several steps, and the first one is the implementation of the gamified TBLT strategy to teach English to lower secondary students for three lessons. During the three lessons, task-based activities were conducted with the integration of simple game elements like badges, challenges, and leaderboards to make the lessons more engaging and encourage the students to participate.

After the intervention, the researcher collected data from the students by using the nine-item open-ended survey. The survey was given during school hours and asked about how engaged and involved the students felt during the lessons, as well as their thoughts on the gamified TBLT activities. On top of that, semi-structured interviews were also conducted with the ESL teachers through online interviews via Google Meet to explore their perceptions about gamified TBLT strategy and the challenges they faced.

The data collected from the survey and interviews was analysed by using thematic analysis as it helps researchers to organise and interpret qualitative data by finding patterns or themes, which enables common ideas to be identified quickly and systematically when dealing with large amounts of data (Ayre & McCaffery, 2022). The responses from the survey were listed, and the recorded interview responses were listened to, re-listened, and transcribed. The researcher then read through the responses repeatedly to get familiar with the data. They then marked the important parts and code them. Similar or recurring codes will then be grouped into major themes related to the student's participation and the challenges teachers faced. The themes were then reviewed and refined, to make sure they truly represented the overall data before being used to answer the research questions.

Results
This section presents the findings from the thematic analysis of students' open-ended survey responses and interviews with five ESL teachers. Key themes emerged related to student participation and teacher experiences with gamified Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT).
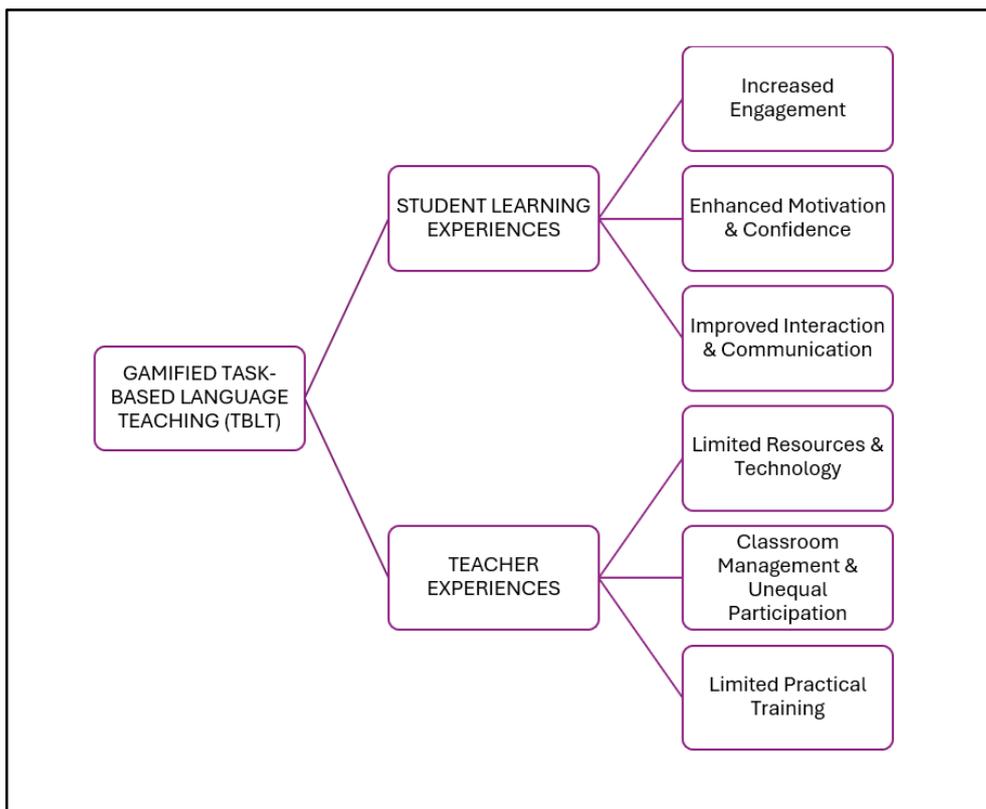
Figure 1: Thematic Map of Gamified TBLT in ESL Classrooms.

Table 1

Synthesis of Themes from Student and Teacher Data

Theme	Source of Data	Evidence from Participants	Data Weight / Strength
Increased Engagement	Students & Teachers	Students described lessons as enjoyable, lively, and exciting; teachers observed increased eagerness and participation, including from introverted students	**Strong** (frequently mentioned by both students and teachers)
Enhanced Motivation and Confidence	Students & Teachers	Students reported speaking more to earn points and feeling comfortable making mistakes; teachers observed higher motivation and willingness to communicate	**Strong**
Improved Interaction and Communication	Students & Teachers	Students highlighted teamwork, negotiation, and peer discussion; teachers observed peer support and collaborative learning	**Strong**
Limited Resources and Technological Constraints	Teachers	Issues related to internet access, lack of devices, and classroom equipment were repeatedly mentioned	**Moderate** (reported by several teachers)
Classroom Management and Unequal Participation	Teachers	Teachers reported noise, dominance of confident students, and difficulty managing excitement during activities	**Moderate**
Limited Practical Training and Teaching Experience	Teachers	Teachers noted insufficient hands-on training and reliance on trial-and-error approaches	**Moderate to Weak** (mentioned by fewer participants, but still significant)

Theme 1: Increased engagement

Many students reported that gamified TBLT made lessons feel more enjoyable, lively and interactive than traditional instruction. For instance, student 1 commented, "I feel more focused and excited when we play a game; it's not boring like usual class." Another noted, "I like when we earn points, I want to answer correctly fast!" these responds reflect a heightened engagement and aligns with the teacher's observations that students were more eager to start tasks compared to traditional TBLT methods. Teacher 1 reported that "students were more willing to take part in tasks... asking, 'What game are we going to play in the next class, teacher?'" and teacher 4 explained that even "introvert students actually participated and could plan and strategies with their group".

Theme 2: Enhanced motivation and confidence

Another strong theme was the effect of gamified activities on motivation and confidence. Many students mentioned that points, competition, and reward made them try harder and speak up more. Students stated that, "I speak English more because I want to get more points for my team", "Because the activities were interactive and supportive, I felt more comfortable speaking, making mistakes, and trying out new language skills", and "It gives us motivation and the dedication to beat other players during the activities since it puts the competitive element in it". Teachers confirmed this trend as teacher 2 noticed that "My form 1 students... enjoyed the competitive and collaborative elements, encouraged them to communicate more in English," and teacher 5 shared that "students are usually more excited to learn and participate in the lesson".

Theme 3: Improved Interaction and Communication

Students frequently mentioned they have good interaction with peers during gamified tasks. The shift from individual work to team-based challenges requires students to negotiate meaning and collaborate to achieve a common goal. For example, student 12 noted, ""We had to talk to each other to solve the tasks and get points for the group. I talked to my classmates more than I usually do" and student 38 mentioned that "Since most tasks needed teamwork to win points or finish challenges, we actually talked more instead of everyone doing their own thing quietly". Teachers also observed this shift in their classroom interaction and participation. Teacher 3 highlighted that the gamified structure encouraged students to support one another by saying "The students were helping their friends who were struggling because they wanted their team to win. It turned the classroom into a community". This collective effort fostered a more communicative environment where English is not just a subject of a study but it is actually a tool to fostered more communication.

Despite the listed benefits, the thematic analysis of the teacher interview data revealed four main challenges encountered during the implementation of gamified Task-Based Language Teaching in ESL classrooms.

Theme 1: Limited Resources and Technological Constraints

One of the prominent challenges reported by teachers was limited access to classroom resources, particularly technology. Teachers from both urban and rural schools experienced issues such as unstable internet connection, lack of devices, and inadequate classroom equipment. Teacher 1 stated that "limited access to devices and unstable internet connection restricted the types of games that could be used". Similarly, teacher 4 mentioned that "the

classroom was not equipped with a projector or screen, so teachers had to bring their own devices". Teachers often adapted by using low-tech or group-based alternatives to ensure students could still participate.

Theme 2: Classroom Management and Unequal Participation
Several teachers reported classroom management issues during gamified activities especially when students became overly excited. Due to this, unequal participation was also observed, with more confident students dominating tasks while quieter or low-proficiency students remained passive. Teacher 2 stated that ""more confident students dominated the activities while quieter students remained passive" and teacher 4 added that "class can be a little bit too loud and challenging to manage if control is not maintained". Therefore, to address these issues, teachers mentioned some implemented strategies such as assigning group roles, setting clear rules and the needs to closely monitoring group work.

Theme 3: Limited Practical Training and Teaching Experience
Teachers also reported limited practical training and hands-on experience with gamified TBLT as a challenge. While most participants had theoretical knowledge from teacher training programmes, they felt that practical exposure to designing and implementing gamified TBLT lessons was insufficient. Teacher 1 stated that "my experience was mostly theoretical and exploratory". Similarly, teacher 2 explained that "there was limited exposure to real classroom examples or ready-made gamified activities". Thus, many teachers relied on self-directed learning and trial-and-error approaches when implementing gamified TBLT.

Discussion
Looking at the research questions about how gamified TBLT affects student participation and the challenges teachers face, the findings show that this strategy has a clear positive impact. In the current study, student who participate in gamified tasks showed much higher levels of engagement and excitement compared to their usual lessons. The survey responses showed that many students felt braver and more focused when points and team challenges were added to their English tasks.

The study found that the fun part of the game acts as a safety net. Students mentioned that they felt comfortable making mistakes because they were focused on winning for their team. This aligns with recent research by who discovered that digital gamified tools provide a supportive and encouraging environment that helps students improve their English performance without feeling stressed Labihah (2024). Similarly, Tsai (2024) found that that competition and rewards significantly increase engagement and make learning more enjoyable for students. This suggest that when we move away from boring, traditional methods and use interactive tasks, students are more willing to try out new language skills freely. In this study, the shift from individual work to team-based games also helped students to talk to each other much more than usual. This real-life interaction is very important for language learning. As students collaborated to earn points, they naturally started helping their friends who were struggling. Mapiro et. al., (2024), highlight that "TBLT is most effective when it is adapted to meet the social needs of the students, as it improves their fluency and confidence in real-life communication". When students have a shared goal, like winning a classroom challenge, they use English as a tool to connect with their peers rather than just a subject they have to compulsory learn at school to pass their examination. However, the

feedback from the five teachers shows that implementing this strategy is not always easy. The teachers reported that "limited resources" and "bad internet" especially in rural schools. Yap et. al., (2024), discussed how the digital divide in Malaysia can disrupt modern teaching methods, which matches what teacher 1 experienced in this study. Furthermore, Deping & Xiukui (2025), pointed out that "some teachers struggle with managing the high energy and "chaos" of active lessons because they lack practical training". This shows that while the strategy works well for students, teachers need more hands-on support and better equipment to support this learning style better. Nevertheless, it is recommended that teachers do not just focus on the technology, but on the spirit of the game. Even in schools with no internet, teachers can use simple, low-tech gamification like paper leaderboards and add elements such as physical challenges to keep the excitement alive. Ashfiah et.al., (2025), suggest that "teachers should be careful to provide clear instructions and support to help students overcome anxiety and grammatical errors during task". By offering various types of interactives activities, teachers can help students learn new words and improve their skills while making the classroom a place where they truly want to learn.

Conclusion
The results of this study clearly show that gamified TBLT is a powerful way to help students participate more in English lessons. By looking at the experiences of the forty students and five teachers, adding game elements to classroom tasks does more than just make the lesson fun. It actually changes how students feel about using the language freely and comfortably. Instead of being afraid to speak, students become more motivated to try their best to help their teams win. This study proves that when we focus more on the human and social side of learning, students become more active to participate and more confident to speak in the class.

These findings match the current trends in our education system. For example, Hashim et.al., (2025), found that "students with lower English level needs this kind of game-like activated to feel motivated enough to speak in class". In this study, the students who used gamified tasks felt a sense of achievement that they did not get from traditional lessons. This is due to the fact that games provide a safe space where making a mistake is not a "failure" but just a part of the learning process. As Labibah (2024), pointed out, "digital and non-digital gamified tools help students feel supported, which leads to better performance and ability to have stronger memory of what they learned"

However, we must also remember the challenges that teachers face. These elements defiantly benefit the students but the teachers are often working very hard behind the scenes with limited resources. As Yap et.al., (2025) mentioned, the digital divide in Malaysia is a real problem that can stop even the best teaching ideas. This research shows that teachers need more than just a textbook but they need practical training on how to manage a loud, active and excited classroom. If people want gamified TBLT to be a success in all schools, we must provide teachers with the tools and the support they need to handle the chaos that comes with high engagement.

Limitations and Future Research
There are several limits to this study. First, the researcher only looked at a small group of students and five teachers from specific areas. Therefore, the results might not be exactly the

same for every school in Malaysia. To make these findings stronger, future research should involve more schools from different states, including both urban and rural area for more diversity. Next, this study only lasted for a short-time. It would be very helpful if future researchers could study the long-term effects of gamified TBLT. For instance, Hashim et.al., (2025), suggest that "this is important to see if this high energy and participation actually lead to better exam scores over a whole year". Lastly, future studies could also look at how different age groups, like older students in higher forms reach to these games as this study only focuses on lower forms students. By doing this, researcher can find the best way to help all students become confident and successfully reach their highest potential. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable qualitative evidence on the potential of gamified TBLT to enhance student participation in ESL classrooms and offers insights that can improve future research and instruction practice.

Conflicts of Interest
The researcher declares that there is no conflict of interest associated with this manuscript.

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