



STUDENTS' LIVED EXPERIENCE OF LEARNING ENGLISH THROUGH TEAM GAMES TOURNAMENT AT THE TENTH GRADE OF SMK NEGERI 1 SIANTAR

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ABSTRACT

Previous research on Teams Games Tournament (TGT) has been dominated by a quantitative focus on learning outcomes, creating a gap in understanding the affective and psychosocial aspects of learning. This qualitative phenomenological study aims to describe the lived experiences of tenth-grade students at SMK Negeri 1 Siantar in learning English through the TGT model. Through phenomenological interviews with 35 students, this study identified five essential themes: (1) Motivation and Learning Enjoyment, (2) Teamwork and Sense of Connectedness, (3) Competition and Emotional Pressure, (4) Independence and Self-Reflection, and (5) Meaningful Learning. The findings reveal that the dynamics of TGT effectively fulfill the Three Basic Psychological Needs in Self-Determination Theory (SDT): Relatedness, Competence, and Autonomy. Overall, students perceive TGT as a “living” and meaningful learning experience, as it integrates academic aspects with the development of soft skills such as collaboration and confidence.

Keywords: Teams Games Tournament (TGT), Lived Experience, Phenomenology, Cooperative Learning, Students' Motivation

A. INTRODUCTION

Education at the vocational high school (SMK) level aims to produce graduates who are ready to enter the workforce. In the context of globalization, English has been established as one of the key competencies that vocational graduates must master. Mastery of English in SMK is not merely an academic achievement but a functional prerequisite for communication in international work environments. Therefore, the English curriculum in vocational schools must



be oriented toward practical communication functions English for Specific Purposes (ESP) emphasizing verbal interaction and real-world language application.

Despite its crucial role, the implementation of English learning in SMK often encounters various challenges. Studies exploring English learning difficulties in vocational contexts reveal wide variations in students' comprehension levels (Yasa & Numertayasa, 2023). The primary challenges are often affective emotional and psychological such as speaking anxiety, lack of confidence, and pressure from extracurricular workloads (Yasa & Numertayasa, 2023). Generally, internal factors such as low motivation and limited interest in language subjects become major barriers to active communication (Tambunsaribu, 2022). This situation indicates the need for pedagogical strategies capable of lowering affective filters while increasing motivation and participation.

To overcome low motivation and affective barriers among vocational students, a shift is needed from teacher-centered learning to interactive, student-centered models. Literature reviews suggest that the use of interactive media, including educational games or digital applications, can effectively enhance motivation and comprehension in English learning (Alifah et al., 2023). Furthermore, learning becomes more meaningful when learners actively experience what they study experiential learning which fosters deeper understanding and engagement (Fauziyah et al., 2025).

The Teams Games Tournament (TGT) is a Cooperative Learning model designed to help students master materials through the integration of teamwork and competitive games (Fauziyah et al., 2025). The TGT model combines cooperation and competition principles: students work in heterogeneous groups to help one another (cooperation), then compete in tournaments against representatives from other teams of equivalent ability (equal opponents) (Amaluddin et al., 2022). TGT is particularly effective for subjects that require repetitive practice and intensive verbal interaction, as it inherently promotes active participation and the development of soft skills such as collaboration, communication, and confidence (Andini, 2020).

Although TGT is known to be effective, most existing research employs quantitative or quasi-experimental approaches. The main focus of these studies is on measuring learning outcomes, such as test score improvements. Meta-analyses confirm that TGT significantly enhances



students' learning performance, with an effectiveness rate reaching 91% at the senior high school level (equivalent to SMK) (Maiti et al., 2021).

The main gap in existing studies lies in the epistemological dimension: current TGT studies explain the model's success but rarely explore the meaning of the experience for learners. Students' motivation, interest, and affective pressure are often measured numerically rather than understood in their essence as lived experiences (Maiti et al., 2021).

This study argues that English learning becomes more meaningful when learners directly experience the process (Afeksi Jurnal, 2024). The phenomenological approach is highly relevant as it allows researchers to explore the subjective meaning and essence of students' experiences as they navigate the cooperative and competitive dynamics of TGT (Asih, 2020). This approach focuses on how students feel encouraged, motivated, or challenged by TGT's social interactions (Van Manen, 1990).

The novelty of this research is established in two dimensions: The first is Contextual: In-depth qualitative research on TGT has never been conducted in the tenth grade of SMK Negeri 1 Siantar. Second is Methodological: This study addresses the research gap in TGT, which has been dominated by quantitative approaches, by focusing on students' lived experiences (affective and psychosocial aspects) through a qualitative (phenomenological) method rather than merely cognitive learning outcomes.

Based on the research background, the identified gap, and the established novelty, the research problem of this study is formulated as follows: "What are the lived experiences (both positive aspects and challenges) encountered by the tenth-grade students of SMK Negeri 1 Siantar in learning English through the Teams Games Tournament model?"

The main objective of this qualitative study is to provide an in-depth description of the lived experiences (covering both positive aspects and challenges) perceived by the tenth-grade students of SMK Negeri 1 Siantar during the process of learning English through the Teams Games Tournament model.

This research makes a substantial contribution to the development of Cooperative Learning theory, particularly the TGT model. By adopting a phenomenological approach, the findings



complement the current understanding that has largely been supported only by quantitative data regarding the effectiveness of TGT. This study offers deeper insights into the affective, psychosocial, and interpersonal challenges that arise from the integration of teamwork and competitive pressure within TGT. Understanding these internal mechanisms can enrich the study of TGT by explaining how the social dynamics generated by this model are genuinely translated into meaningful learning experiences.

The practical benefits of this research offer valuable insights for various educational stakeholders. For English teachers, these findings provide detailed empirical input to modify TGT implementation, allowing them to maximize positive aspects like team solidarity while mitigating challenges such as competition-related anxiety. Furthermore, for the school (SMK Negeri 1 Siantar), this study provides specific evaluative data regarding the impact of TGT from the students' perspective, which is crucial for future curriculum and instructional strategy decisions. Finally, for the students, this research facilitates a reflective process that helps them internalize the importance of teamwork and develop strategies to cope with pressure during language acquisition.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

Cooperative Learning and the Teams Games Tournament (TGT)

Cooperative Learning (CL) is an instructional strategy in which small groups of students work together toward a common academic goal. This model is grounded in two core principles: Positive Interdependence and Individual Accountability (Amaluddin et al., 2022). The Teams Games Tournament (TGT) model is one of the types of Cooperative Learning developed within the Student Team Learning framework.

The TGT model combines team collaboration with inter-group competition structured through tournaments (Fauziyah et al., 2025). This integration aims to increase students' motivation and learning activity.

TGT consists of five essential components for effective implementation (Amaluddin et al., 2022; Fauziyah et al., 2025): (1) Class Presentation: Delivery of materials by the teacher, (2)



Teams: Formation of heterogeneous learning groups that cooperate and practice together, (3) Games: Quiz-based or question-and-answer activities designed to reinforce understanding through intensive practice, (4) Tournament: Individual students compete at tournament tables against peers of similar ability levels, ensuring Individual Accountability, (5) Team Recognition: Awards or public recognition are given to teams that achieve the best performance.

These components work together to promote both collaboration and healthy competition, encouraging students to support one another while striving for individual and group excellence.

Teams Games Tournament in Language Learning

The application of TGT in second language (L2) learning has proven effective because it provides an ideal framework for practicing productive skills, especially speaking (Andini, 2020). During team activities, students are encouraged to interact, assist one another, and practice repeatedly until they feel confident to perform or compete in the tournament (Andini, 2020). This supportive environment helps reduce the affective filter, particularly learning anxiety, which is a common barrier in L2 acquisition.

Empirical studies have demonstrated that TGT increases student engagement. A Classroom Action Research (CAR) focusing on improving students' engagement in English learning reported an increase in engagement scores from 54.98% during the initial observation to 89.07% by the end of the third cycle (Amaluddin et al., 2022). Furthermore, a quasi-experimental study testing the effectiveness of TGT in teaching speaking found a statistically significant result using the Mann–Whitney U-test ($p = 0.003$), indicating that the model not only improved outcomes but also made the classroom atmosphere “more active” and “more engaging” (Azzam, 2025).

TGT has also been found flexible for various language materials, such as news texts at the senior high school level (Fauziyah et al., 2025). These findings reinforce that TGT serves as both a pedagogical and motivational tool in language education.



Student Motivation and Engagement in Language (L2) Learning

To understand the mechanism underlying TGT's effectiveness, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by Ryan and Deci provides a relevant theoretical framework (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The core of SDT lies in the Three Basic Psychological Needs that are universal to all learners: (1) Autonomy: the sense of control and choice in one's actions, (2) Competence: the feeling of effectiveness and mastery, (3) Relatedness: the sense of connection and belonging with others.

Fulfilling these needs has been shown to positively influence students' motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes in second language contexts (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Alzahrani, 2023).

Engagement in L2 learning refers to the degree to which learners invest effort, emotion, and thought in their learning processes (Hiver et al., 2020). It comprises three interrelated domains: (A) Behavioral Engagement (participation in learning activities), (B) Emotional Engagement (interest, enthusiasm, and enjoyment), and, (C) Cognitive Engagement (mental investment in learning and problem-solving).

Studies show a significant positive correlation between students' L2 engagement and their academic achievement (Alzahrani, 2023). In this light, the TGT model, which promotes both social relatedness and competence through gamified collaboration, aligns strongly with the principles of SDT and engagement theory.

Phenomenology and Lived Experience in Educational Research

This study employs a phenomenological approach, which aims to examine and describe phenomena as they are directly experienced by individuals (Asih, 2020). Rooted in the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, phenomenology emphasizes "returning to the phenomena themselves."

Hermeneutic Phenomenology, as developed by Max van Manen (1990), is particularly relevant in educational research because it focuses on interpreting and understanding the essence of lived experiences (Alfian et al., 2020). In this approach, the researcher acts as the main



instrument (human instrument) and is responsible for deep reflection and interpretation to uncover the meaning of participants' experiences (Afeksi Jurnal, 2024).

Thus, phenomenology allows researchers not only to describe but also to interpret how students make sense of their learning processes, emotions, and challenges offering insights that cannot be captured through quantitative methods.

Previous Studies on TGT and English Language Learning

Recent empirical studies converge on the conclusion that the TGT model is effective in language learning, though most adopt quantitative designs.

Table 1.1 Previous Studies on TGT and English Language Learning

Author and Year	Focus of Study	Methodology	Key Findings
Azzam (2025)	Effectiveness of TGT in Speaking Skills	Quasi-experimental (Mann Whitney U-test)	TGT was significantly effective ($p = 0.003$). Class atmosphere became more active and enthusiastic.
Fauziyah, Meilani, & Salsabila (2025)	Application of TGT in News Texts	Empirical Journal (Didaktik)	TGT was successfully applied to the teaching of text-based materials in grade XI.
Amaluddin et al. (2022)	Enhancing Student Engagement	Classroom Action Research (CAR)	Engagement increased significantly, reaching 89.07% after three cycles.
Maiti, Ruhmayanti, & Husnawati (2021)	Meta-Analysis of TGT Effectiveness	Quantitative Meta-Analysis	TGT showed a strong impact on learning outcomes at the senior high school level (91% effectiveness).

Critical Gap Analysis: Although these studies strongly support the effectiveness of TGT in improving learning outcomes and engagement, none explicitly use a phenomenological approach to explore students' *lived experiences* with TGT's social and emotional dynamics (Maiti et al., 2021). This research thus seeks to fill that critical gap by emphasizing students' voices and subjective experiences in the English learning process.



C. METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach, specifically a descriptive phenomenological design, to explore the authentic lived experiences of students. According to Creswell (2014), a qualitative approach is essential when the researcher seeks to understand the complex meanings and social context ascribed to a human problem. By adopting this framework, the study could delve into the students' subjective perceptions of the TGT model without being limited by predetermined variables. Furthermore, as noted by Ary et al. (2010), descriptive qualitative research is characterized by its focus on providing a detailed and narrative account of the phenomenon under study, ensuring that the results reflect the depth of the students' actual learning journey.

Research Participants or Population and Sample

This research was conducted at SMK Negeri 1 Siantar, located in Pematangsiantar, North Sumatra, Indonesia. The participants consisted of students from Class X Fashion Design 1 and Class X Fashion Design 2. In total, 35 students participated in the study (20 from Class X Fashion Design 1 and 15 from Class X Fashion Design 2).

Additionally, one or two English teachers who implemented the TGT model were also included as supporting participants, providing complementary insights into the students' learning experiences.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling. This method involves intentionally selecting individuals based on characteristics relevant to the research objectives (Lenaini, 2020). The main criterion in this study was students who had directly experienced English learning through the TGT model, ensuring that their perspectives were authentic and aligned with the research focus.

Instruments

The primary instrument used for data collection was a semi-structured interview guide. Following the recommendation of Merriam (2009), semi-structured interviews were chosen to allow for a flexible yet rigorous exploration of the participants' experiences. The researcher



decided to exclude the questionnaire instrument as suggested in the review process to prioritize a deeper qualitative focus on the students' voices.

The interview process involved 10 open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed narratives. The questions were asked in a conversational and non-intimidating manner to encourage students to speak freely about their experiences. The interview covered five core aspects:

1. Motivation: How their interest in English changed during TGT.
2. Social Dynamics: Their feelings regarding support and cooperation within their teams.
3. Emotional Response: Their experience of tension or pressure during the tournament phase.
4. Self-Awareness: What they discovered about their own abilities and independence.
5. Perceived Value: Their overall reflection on whether this method made learning more meaningful.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Van Manen's Phenomenological Analysis (1990), which consists of six interconnected steps (Alfian et al., 2020): (1) Turning to the Nature of the Lived Experience: focusing on the central phenomenon of learning English through TGT, (2) Investigating Experience as We Live It: gathering detailed descriptions from the perspectives of students and teachers, (3) Reflecting on Essential Themes: identifying core themes that capture the essence of students' lived experiences, (4) Describing the Experience through Writing and Rewriting: articulating the meanings revealed through reflection and interpretation, (5) Maintaining a Strong and Oriented Relation to the Phenomenon: ensuring consistency between interpretations and participants' real experiences, (6) Balancing the Research Context by Considering Parts and Whole: synthesizing findings to reveal the holistic meaning of the phenomenon.

This phenomenological approach enabled the researcher to interpret the subjective, emotional, motivational, and social dimensions of students' experiences in learning through the TGT model.

D. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Phenomenological Interview Findings

Based on Van Manen's (1990) phenomenological analysis, five essential themes emerged from students' lived experiences of learning English through the Teams Games Tournament (TGT) model.

Theme 1: Motivation and Enjoyment in Learning

The central experience in this theme is a transformation from boredom and low enthusiasm to high motivation and enjoyment, as learning became more engaging and less intimidating.

Student 1 (S1) shared:

“Before learning through TGT, I wasn't excited to study English. But since we learned through games and teamwork, I became more enthusiastic because it feels like playing while learning. I'm no longer afraid of making mistakes when speaking.”

Student 3 (S3) confirmed this change in classroom atmosphere:

“Usually, English lessons make me sleepy and bored, but when the teacher used TGT, the class became lively and fun. I felt that learning was no longer boring. I even became more confident to speak English in front of my friends, even though I still made mistakes, haha.”

This theme shows that TGT successfully transformed students' emotional engagement turning fear into enthusiasm.

Theme 2: Teamwork and Sense of Relatedness

The second essential experience is the emergence of strong emotional bonds and constructive mutual support among students.

Student 4 (S4) highlighted the value of collaboration:

“What I like the most is the teamwork. We help each other, and if someone doesn't understand, we explain. I feel closer to my friends.”

Student 5 (S5) explained how teamwork helped overcome shyness:



“I used to feel shy when the teacher asked me questions, but during TGT, my teammates encouraged me to try answering. That made me brave enough to speak. I learned what real cooperation means.”

This theme reflects how TGT fosters social relatedness, fulfilling students’ emotional needs for belonging and mutual encouragement.

Theme 3: Competition and Emotional Pressure

Although TGT is considered a fun model, its tournament element also introduces emotional tension in the form of nervousness or anxiety, which students later interpreted as a positive challenge.

Student 7 (S7) described the emotional tension:

“During the tournament, I was nervous and afraid that my team would lose. But even when we lost, my teammates still supported me. I learned not to be afraid of failure.”

Student 8 (S8) noted that the pressure became positive due to fair competition:

“I was anxious, especially when competing against other classes. But because the system was fair our opponents were on the same level the pressure actually made me want to try harder.”

This theme shows that emotional pressure can evolve into motivational tension when supported by fairness and teamwork.

Theme 4: Independence and Self-Reflection

The TGT experience encouraged students to develop self-awareness and self-regulation in their learning processes.

Student 5 (S5) described increased confidence and self-control:

“Through TGT, I realized I wasn’t confident enough. But after joining several times, I learned to manage myself so I could contribute to the team. I feel like I’ve grown.”

Student 8 (S8) reflected on discovering their true ability:

“I realized I can actually speak English better than I thought. TGT helped me discover my real potential.”

This theme demonstrates how TGT supports autonomy and metacognitive growth through reflective learning.



Theme 5: Meaningful Learning

Students concluded that TGT provided an experience that went beyond curriculum goals learning that felt alive and meaningful.

Student 1 (S1) viewed TGT as a lesson in soft skills:

“Maybe it’s not just me, but I feel that TGT isn’t only about learning English it’s also about teamwork and courage. I learned things that aren’t in the textbook.”

Student 6 (S6) summarized the essence:

“I think learning like this should happen more often because it makes us enjoy the process, not just the results. Learning feels alive.”

This final theme encapsulates the spirit of experiential learning, where students experience personal and social growth alongside linguistic improvement.

Discussion

The phenomenological findings provide a rich description of students’ lived experiences, addressing the gap previously dominated by quantitative data (Maiti et al., 2021). The analysis confirms that TGT is effective not only cognitively but also in fulfilling students’ psychological and emotional needs as framed in Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination

TGT and the Fulfillment of Basic Psychological Needs (SDT)

Students’ experiences can be analyzed through the lens of SDT’s Three Basic Psychological Needs (Ryan & Deci, 2017):

Relatedness: Social Support Reducing Anxiety

Themes of teamwork and connectedness (S4, S5, S6) validate the fulfillment of Relatedness. Students reported feeling supported and appreciated by their peers an essential mechanism in cooperative learning (Fauziyah et al., 2025). This collaborative environment created a social safety net, which is especially crucial for vocational students who often experience speaking anxiety (Yasa & Numertayasa, 2023).



Competence: From Anxiety to Self-Improvement

Themes of motivation and enjoyment (S1, S2, S3), as well as competition and emotional tension (S7, S8, S9), reveal the fulfillment of Competence. The fair tournament structure in TGT (equal opportunity for success) allowed even lower-performing students to experience success and self-efficacy (S8). This aligns with prior findings that TGT enhances classroom engagement and enthusiasm (Azzam, 2025; Amaluddin et al., 2022).

Autonomy: Reflection and Self-Regulation

Themes of independence and reflection (S2, S5, S8) highlight the growth of Autonomy, where students began to regulate their own learning behaviors to contribute effectively to their teams (Amaluddin et al., 2022). This autonomy, supported by peer accountability, strengthened students' intrinsic motivation and self-discipline.

TGT as a Model of Meaningful Experiential Learning

The final theme Meaningful Learning supports the view that learning becomes more profound when students actively experience it. Instead of rote memorization, students practiced English functionally while developing soft skills like teamwork, empathy, and confidence (S1).

Such experiences represent Emotional Engagement at a high level, where students perceive English learning as “alive” and personally significant (S6). This finding aligns with SDT's prediction that engagement supported by autonomy and relatedness results in greater long-term motivation and learning outcomes (Alzahrani, 2023).

In essence, the TGT model transforms the English learning process into an experiential, affective, and socially meaningful journey bridging the gap between academic performance and human experience.



E. CONCLUSION

Based on the phenomenological analysis of the lived experiences of 35 tenth-grade students at SMK Negeri 1 Siantar, this study successfully described students' experiences in learning English through the Teams Games Tournament (TGT) model. These experiences were multidimensional, encompassing both positive aspects and challenges, which crystallized into five essential themes. In terms of positive experiences, students reported increased enthusiasm and reduced speaking anxiety as learning transformed from a theoretical activity into an enjoyable and engaging game-based experience. The implementation of TGT made English learning feel more dynamic, encouraging students to participate actively without fear of making mistakes. In addition, students highlighted the importance of teamwork and a sense of relatedness, as they felt strong social support and emotional bonds within their teams. This sense of belonging helped them overcome shyness and motivated them to engage more confidently in oral communication. The study also revealed that TGT fostered independence and self-reflection, as students became more aware of their learning processes and began to regulate their own participation. Through this experience, they learned to recognize their strengths and weaknesses, developing a stronger sense of competence and autonomy in their learning journey.

Despite these positive outcomes, students also encountered certain challenges and shifting perceptions. During the tournament phase, many initially experienced nervousness or anxiety. However, this emotional tension gradually evolved into positive motivation as they realized that the competition was fair, with equal opponents and supportive teammates. The experience of competing became an opportunity to test their abilities and build resilience. Finally, students described TGT as a meaningful learning experience that went beyond acquiring linguistic skills. They viewed it as a "living" learning process that taught not only English but also valuable soft skills such as cooperation, self-confidence, and persistence.

Theoretically, these findings demonstrate that the TGT model functions as a powerful pedagogical intervention because it structurally fulfills students' three basic psychological needs—relatedness, competence, and autonomy which are central to motivation as explained in Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In summary, TGT is not merely an instructional technique but an experiential learning process that integrates academic



achievement with emotional growth and social connection, leading to deeper and more sustainable engagement in English learning.

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