

Teaching Vocabulary through Card Games at Kindergarten Level

Wahyu Utama, Slamet Hamid, Nur Sodik

Universitas Indraprasta PGRI, Jakarta, Indonesia

wutama1487@gmail.com

Abstract

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This study explores the effectiveness of using card games as a medium for teaching vocabulary to kindergarten students. The research was conducted at Kindergarten in South Jakarta, employing a descriptive qualitative approach. The study aims to analyze the teaching process, the students' engagement, and the challenges encountered in implementing card games as a teaching strategy. The findings suggest that card games not only enhance vocabulary acquisition but also foster a fun and interactive learning environment. Additionally, this study discusses teacher perceptions, student learning behaviors, and the potential long-term impact of game-based learning in early childhood education.

Keywords: teaching; vocabulary; card games; interactive learning; kindergarten education; game-based learning

(*) Corresponding Author: wutama1487@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, English has become the dominant language of international communication, education, and business. As a result, early English education has gained increasing attention, particularly in non-native English-speaking countries, where proficiency in English is seen as a crucial skill for future academic and professional success (Crystal, 2003). One of the most fundamental aspects of language learning is vocabulary acquisition, as an adequate vocabulary is essential for effective comprehension and communication (Nation, 2001). Research has consistently shown that a rich vocabulary is a strong predictor of language proficiency and literacy development, particularly in early childhood education (Stahl & Nagy, 2006).

Despite its significance, vocabulary instruction for young learners remains a challenge. Traditional teaching methods, such as rote memorization and passive word repetition, are often ineffective for early childhood learners due to their limited attention span and their preference for interactive and engaging activities (Cameron, 2001). Studies suggest that young learners acquire language more effectively when they are actively engaged in learning experiences that incorporate movement, visual stimuli, and social interaction (Ellis, 2020). Consequently, educators are encouraged to implement innovative teaching approaches that align with children's developmental characteristics and natural learning tendencies.

One effective approach that aligns with these principles is game-based learning, particularly through the use of card games. Play-based learning has been widely recognized as an essential component of early childhood education, as it fosters cognitive, social, and linguistic development in a natural and enjoyable manner (Vygotsky, 1978). Card games, in particular, provide an interactive way for young learners to recognize new words, improve pronunciation, and engage in meaningful language practice with their peers (Wright, Betteridge, & Buckby, 2006). Furthermore, game-based learning has been found

to enhance motivation and retention, making it a valuable strategy for teaching vocabulary in early childhood settings (Gee, 2003).

This study aims to analyze the effectiveness of card games in teaching vocabulary at the kindergarten level in South Jakarta. Specifically, it explores (1) how card games enhance children's vocabulary acquisition, (2) their level of engagement in game-based learning, and (3) the challenges encountered in implementing this method in the classroom. By examining these aspects, this research seeks to contribute to the development of more engaging and effective instructional strategies for early childhood educators. The findings of this study are expected to provide insights into how game-based learning can be effectively integrated into early childhood language instruction, ultimately improving vocabulary learning outcomes and overall language development in young learners.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the implementation of card games as a vocabulary teaching strategy in a kindergarten setting. Qualitative research is particularly suitable for investigating classroom dynamics, learner engagement, and the contextual factors that influence language acquisition (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study was designed to capture in-depth insights into how card games facilitate vocabulary retention, enhance student engagement, and contribute to the overall learning experience of young learners.

The research was conducted at a kindergarten in South Jakarta, involving a class of 20 students aged 4 to 5 years old. The participants were selected based on their enrollment in an English language program where vocabulary development was a primary focus. Additionally, two kindergarten teachers and ten parents were included as informants to provide complementary perspectives on the effectiveness of card games in vocabulary learning. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the study, ensuring that all participants, particularly the children, were engaged in a safe and supportive learning environment.

The teaching sessions were structured into three phases—pre-teaching, teaching, and post-teaching activities—allowing for a systematic exploration of the impact of card games on vocabulary acquisition.

1. Pre-teaching Phase

Before introducing the card games, teachers prepared lesson plans that outlined learning objectives, selected age-appropriate vocabulary words, and designed engaging game mechanics. The vocabulary items were chosen based on their relevance to children's daily lives, including words related to animals, colors, and common objects (Cameron, 2001). Teachers also familiarized students with the target words through visual aids and storytelling to provide contextual understanding before the game-based activities commenced.

2. Teaching Phase

During this phase, the card games were introduced as the primary instructional tool. The activities were designed to be interactive, multisensory, and socially engaging, allowing students to learn through play. The games involved matching pictures to words, memory-based activities, and role-playing scenarios where students practiced using the new vocabulary in context. Teachers facilitated the games, provided scaffolding when necessary, and observed how students responded to the learning process. Student engagement levels, verbal participation, and peer interactions were closely monitored to assess the effectiveness of the approach.

3. Post-teaching Phase

After the game-based sessions, a reflection and assessment session was conducted. Teachers guided students in reviewing the newly learned vocabulary through reinforcement activities, such as group discussions and storytelling exercises. Additionally, student assessments were carried out using simple recall tests and picture-word matching activities to measure vocabulary retention. To gain a broader perspective on the impact of the card games, structured feedback was collected from teachers and parents through semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. This feedback provided insights into whether students demonstrated vocabulary retention beyond the classroom and whether they exhibited increased enthusiasm for English learning at home.

Data collection was conducted through three primary methods:

1. *Classroom Observations* – Researchers observed teaching sessions, focusing on student engagement, interaction patterns, and vocabulary usage during the game-based activities. Observational field notes were recorded systematically.
2. *Teacher Interviews* – Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers to gain insights into their perceptions of the method's effectiveness, challenges faced during implementation, and their strategies for scaffolding learning through games.
3. *Student Assessments and Parent Feedback* – Simple vocabulary tests and matching activities were administered to gauge students' retention and recall of newly learned words. Additionally, parents provided feedback on whether children demonstrated increased interest in using the vocabulary at home.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, wherein patterns and recurring themes related to vocabulary retention, student engagement, and instructional effectiveness were identified (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The findings were then compared with existing literature on early childhood language learning and game-based instruction to validate their significance.

By employing this structured approach, the study aims to provide a comprehensive and evidence-based understanding of how card games can serve as an effective pedagogical tool in early childhood vocabulary instruction.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Results

The structured implementation of card games in vocabulary instruction was divided into three key phases:

1. Pre-teaching Activities

Teachers prepared lesson plans by selecting vocabulary words relevant to young learners' daily experiences. These words were introduced using visual aids such as flashcards and illustrations to provide initial exposure. The pre-teaching phase ensured that students had a foundational understanding of the words before engaging in game-based activities.

2. Teaching Activities

The main instructional phase involved interactive card-matching games, where students identified and pronounced vocabulary words correctly. These activities promoted hands-on learning, allowing students to associate words with images while engaging in active participation. The game-based approach also facilitated peer collaboration, as students worked together to complete tasks and reinforce their understanding.

3. Post-teaching Activities

To reinforce learning, teachers conducted group discussions and assessments to evaluate students' vocabulary retention. Assessment methods included oral recall tests, picture-word matching, and basic written exercises to measure progress. Observations indicated that students were able to recall and pronounce vocabulary words with greater accuracy after participating in the games.

Classroom observations revealed that students were highly engaged throughout the learning process. Compared to traditional teaching methods, students demonstrated improved vocabulary retention, better pronunciation accuracy, and greater enthusiasm for language learning. The interactive nature of card games encouraged peer learning and enhanced social interaction, which contributed to a more dynamic classroom environment.

Teacher interviews highlighted that game-based learning reduced student anxiety and encouraged active participation. Additionally, feedback from parents suggested that students showed increased interest in learning new words at home, indicating that the impact of the games extended beyond the classroom setting.

Despite the benefits, several challenges were encountered during implementation:

1. *Limited Attention Span*: Some students lost focus quickly. To address this, teachers incorporated varied activities and colorful, engaging cards to sustain interest.
2. *Pronunciation Difficulties*: Certain vocabulary words posed challenges in pronunciation. Teachers implemented repetition and phonetic exercises to help students improve accuracy.
3. *Classroom Management Issues*: Managing an active classroom during game-based learning required structured guidelines. Teachers introduced clear rules and group-based competition to maintain order.
4. *Scalability*: The effectiveness of card games varied depending on class size and student demographics. Teachers noted that smaller groups benefited more from the interactive approach, while larger classrooms required modifications such as team-based learning to ensure effectiveness.

Discussion

The findings of this study confirm that game-based vocabulary instruction can significantly enhance language learning outcomes for young learners. These results align with previous research highlighting the effectiveness of active learning strategies in early childhood education (Liu & Chu, 2020). The structured implementation of pre-teaching, teaching, and post-teaching activities ensured that students not only learned new words but also retained and applied them in various contexts.

The Role of Engagement in Vocabulary Learning

Student engagement plays a crucial role in language acquisition at the kindergarten level. The observations from this study are consistent with findings by Taheri (2018), who reported that game-based learning fosters motivation, reduces anxiety, and improves vocabulary recall among young learners. Additionally, the interactive nature of card games aligns with Piaget's (1962) constructivist theory, which emphasizes that children learn best through active engagement and hands-on experiences.

Furthermore, teacher interviews indicated that reducing anxiety and creating a playful learning environment contributed to increased student participation. These results support the work of Puspitasari et al. (2021), who found that interactive learning environments help young learners develop confidence in using new vocabulary.

Cognitive Benefits of Game-Based Learning

The structured use of card games provided both cognitive and social benefits for students. Studies by Hwang et al. (2022) emphasize that multisensory learning approaches (such as combining visuals, sounds, and kinesthetic activities) improve memory retention and comprehension. The current findings also reinforce the dual-coding theory (Paivio, 2019), which suggests that learners process and retain information more effectively when it is presented through both verbal and visual formats.

Additionally, peer interaction during card games enhanced communication skills, supporting research by Zhao & Morgan (2021), which found that collaborative learning environments promote social development and language acquisition in young learners.

Addressing Challenges in Game-Based Learning

Although game-based learning has proven to be effective, challenges such as attention span limitations and pronunciation difficulties must be carefully managed. The results of this study suggest that varied activities and scaffolded repetition techniques can help overcome these barriers. Similar strategies have been recommended by Teng (2020), who emphasized that incorporating structured phonetic exercises alongside interactive games enhances pronunciation accuracy.

Classroom management remains a critical factor in implementing game-based strategies in larger groups. Research by Mahmoud & Tanni (2022) highlights the importance of structured group activities and rule-based learning to maintain classroom discipline while promoting engagement. In this study, teachers found that team-based competition and guided activities helped ensure that students remained focused and actively participated in the lessons.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

Given the positive impact of card games on vocabulary learning, future studies should explore scalability and long-term retention effects of this method in diverse classroom settings. Additionally, incorporating digital game-based learning platforms may further enhance engagement and accessibility, as suggested by Lin et al. (2023).

This study contributes to the growing body of research advocating for game-based pedagogical approaches in early childhood education. The findings suggest that integrating interactive and multisensory learning activities into kindergarten curricula can lead to better language acquisition outcomes and more enjoyable learning experiences for young learners.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the effectiveness of card games as a dynamic and engaging instructional tool for teaching vocabulary to kindergarten students. The findings demonstrate that game-based learning fosters vocabulary acquisition, enhances retention, and creates an interactive learning environment that aligns with young learners' developmental needs. By integrating structured play into classroom instruction, card games encourage active participation, peer collaboration, and improved pronunciation skills, making them a valuable pedagogical strategy in early childhood education.

Beyond vocabulary learning, observations and teacher feedback suggest that game-based approaches contribute to reducing student anxiety, increasing motivation, and fostering a positive classroom atmosphere. These aspects are essential in non-native English-speaking contexts, where conventional rote memorization techniques often struggle to maintain young learners' engagement. Instead, card games transform learning

into an enjoyable and immersive experience, supporting language acquisition in a way that feels natural and meaningful to children.

The study underscores the need for interactive and student-centered methodologies in early childhood language instruction. As young learners thrive in environments that encourage exploration and play, educators are encouraged to incorporate creative and socially interactive teaching techniques that make language learning both effective and enjoyable. Game-based strategies, particularly those that involve hands-on engagement and peer interaction, have the potential to bridge the gap between structured learning and natural language development.

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of card games in vocabulary instruction, further research is needed to explore long-term effects, comparative learning strategies, and the integration of technology-enhanced approaches. The following areas are particularly worth investigating:

1. Long-Term Effects on Language Development

Future studies should examine how game-based learning impacts students' overall language proficiency over time. Longitudinal research could assess whether vocabulary acquired through card games remains in students' active lexicon and how well they apply it in different linguistic contexts.

2. Comparative Analysis of Educational Games

Investigating the effectiveness of various game-based learning tools, such as digital games, board games, and role-playing activities, could provide deeper insights into which methods are most effective for different aspects of language acquisition. This would help educators design more diverse and adaptive instructional strategies suited to different learning styles.

3. Technology-Enhanced Learning Approaches

As technology continues to shape modern education, research on digital learning platforms, augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and gamified e-learning applications could offer valuable perspectives on how technology can enhance vocabulary acquisition. Understanding how these tools compare to traditional card games could help optimize future language instruction.

4. Adaptation to Online and Hybrid Learning Models

With the increasing shift toward blended and online education, it is essential to explore how game-based learning can be effectively implemented in virtual classrooms. Future research should investigate strategies for maintaining student engagement in remote settings, as well as the potential of hybrid instructional models that combine digital and traditional learning approaches.

This study reinforces the idea that learning should be an active, enjoyable, and socially engaging process, particularly for young learners acquiring a new language. By integrating game-based strategies into early childhood education, educators can enhance language acquisition, support cognitive development, and foster a lifelong love for learning. As research in educational methodologies continues to evolve, innovative approaches such as card games, digital tools, and interactive storytelling will play a crucial role in shaping the future of language instruction for young learners.

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