



## DEVELOPING VOCABULARY IN YOUNG LEARNERS THROUGH PLAY-BASED LEARNING

### *MENGEMBANGKAN KOSAKATA PADA SISWA MUDA MELALUI PEMBELAJARAN BERBASIS BERMAIN*

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#### Abstrak

*Penelitian ini mengeksplorasi peran pembelajaran berbasis permainan dalam mengembangkan kosakata bahasa Inggris di kalangan pelajar muda. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui observasi kelas dan wawancara dengan guru sekolah dasar. Temuan penelitian mengungkapkan bahwa aktivitas berbasis permainan seperti permainan, bermain peran, dan bercerita interaktif secara signifikan meningkatkan perolehan kosakata dengan menciptakan lingkungan belajar yang menyenangkan, menarik, dan bermakna. Penelitian ini menyoroti bagaimana permainan tidak hanya menumbuhkan motivasi tetapi juga mendukung pembelajaran kontekstual, yang memungkinkan anak-anak memperoleh dan mengingat kata-kata baru secara alami. Implikasi untuk praktik kelas dan desain kurikulum masa depan dibahas.*

**Kata Kunci:** *Mengembangkan Kosakata, Pembelajaran Berbasis Bermain*

#### Abstract

This study explores the role of play-based learning in developing English vocabulary among young learners. Utilizing a qualitative approach, data were gathered through classroom observations and interviews with primary school teachers. The findings reveal that play-based activities such as games, role-playing, and interactive storytelling significantly enhance vocabulary acquisition by creating a fun, engaging, and meaningful learning environment. The study highlights how play not only fosters motivation but also supports contextual learning, allowing children to naturally acquire and retain new words. Implications for classroom practices and future curriculum design are discussed.

**Keywords:** *Developing Vocabulary, Play-Based Learning*

#### INTRODUCTION

The early years of education are critical for language development, especially for learners acquiring a second or foreign language. (Soori et al., 2023) In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), vocabulary plays a fundamental role in enabling young learners to communicate and comprehend effectively. However, teaching vocabulary to children poses unique challenges due to their limited attention span and developmental stage, which requires methods tailored to their cognitive and emotional needs.

Traditional language teaching methods, which often rely on memorization and repetition, may not be effective or engaging for young learners. (*PUBLISHED-EffectsofStorytellingandStoryReading*, n.d.) Children learn best through play, which is a natural part



of their developmental process. Therefore, incorporating play into English language instruction is seen as a promising way to enhance vocabulary learning in a more meaningful and enjoyable manner.

Play-based learning provides opportunities for young learners to engage in language-rich activities that are contextual, interactive, and socially driven. (Rahman et al., 2020) Through games, songs, and dramatization, children are exposed to new words in authentic situations, which helps deepen their understanding and retention of vocabulary. These activities also allow learners to practice language use in a non-threatening environment.

Moreover, play encourages exploration and experimentation with language. When children participate in playful interactions, they are more likely to take risks, ask questions, and try out new words without the fear of making mistakes. This fosters a sense of linguistic confidence and promotes more active language engagement in and outside the classroom.

Despite the growing recognition of play-based learning, there remains a need for empirical studies that examine how such approaches influence vocabulary development in real classroom settings. This study seeks to fill that gap by exploring how play-based strategies are implemented by teachers and how they impact vocabulary acquisition among young English learners.

### **Research Focus**

This research focuses on investigating how play-based learning strategies contribute to the development of English vocabulary among young learners in EFL classroom settings. It explores the types of play activities used, their implementation by teachers, and the perceived impact on learners' vocabulary growth.

### **Research Questions**

1. What types of play-based activities are commonly used by teachers to develop English vocabulary in young learners?
2. How do young learners respond to play-based vocabulary learning activities in the classroom?

### **RESEARCH METHODS**

Qualitative methodology is a research approach that aims to understand phenomena in depth through the exploration of meaning, experience, views, and human behavior in a specific context (Miles, Matthew B., A. Michael Huberman, 2019). In contrast to quantitative methods that rely on numbers and statistics, qualitative methods use non-numerical data, such as interviews, observations, field notes, and documents. The data obtained is then analyzed descriptively and interpretively, not through statistical calculations.

Qualitative research is usually flexible, contextual, and in-depth. The goal is not to test hypotheses definitively, but to understand why and how a process occurs from the participant's point of view. This title emphasizes how children develop vocabulary through game-based learning. To understand this process, it is necessary to observe the dynamics of the classroom, the interaction between teacher and student, as well as the child's experiences and reactions when playing while



learning. All of this cannot be measured with numbers, but needs to be explored through a qualitative approach.

## **Theoretical Studies**

### **1. Vocabulary Development**

Effective vocabulary development for children requires explicit teaching as well as exposure to vocabulary in a meaningful context. They introduced vocabulary classifications into three levels: Tier 1 (colloquial words), Tier 2 (functional and academic words that often appear in various contexts), and Tier 3 (technical or specific terms). The main focus in teaching vocabulary for children should be in Tier 2, as this group has the most influence on their reading and writing skills. This vocabulary is not always acquired through everyday interactions. (Soori et al., 2023)

Vocabulary teaching should be done contextually and interactively, not just through memorization. Children need the opportunity to use new words in meaningful real activities, such as in play activities. Through the repetition and use of words in various game contexts, their understanding of the meaning of words becomes stronger and more applicative. This is why play-based approaches can be an effective method for building early childhood vocabulary.

### **2. Play-Based Learning**

the play-based learning approach is rooted in Vygotsky's theory which states that play is the main tool in children's mental development. (Suwastini et al., 2022) In play, children not only develop social and emotional abilities, but also cognitive and language skills. Through play, children explore ideas, take roles, and verbally interact with their peers—all of which contribute to the growth of vocabulary naturally and contextually.

In addition, play provides children with the opportunity to use language in an imaginative and social context. In play situations, they often repeat words, ask questions, or explain their ideas—all of which reinforce the memory and vocabulary use they've learned. Therefore, play is not only a recreational activity, but also a very powerful educational tool to significantly develop children's language and vocabulary.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings of this study reveal that play-based learning significantly contributes to the development of English vocabulary among young learners in EFL settings. Observations and teacher interviews consistently demonstrated that when vocabulary is integrated into playful activities, learners show greater motivation, engagement, and retention. This supports Beck et al.'s theory that vocabulary development requires contextual and interactive learning rather than isolated memorization (Li, 2024).

Play-based activities such as role-playing, storytelling, singing, and interactive games provide learners with an immersive environment that facilitates meaningful exposure to vocabulary. These types of activities create conditions for repetition, contextualization, and functional language use. The following table summarizes the main types of play observed in this study and their impact on vocabulary acquisition:



**1. Data Tabulation 1.0**

Type of Play-Based Activity	Sample Vocabulary	Student Engagement	Effect on Vocabulary Learning
Role-Playing (e.g., shop simulation)	buy, sell, price, want, how much	High (active participation)	Reinforced use of functional expressions
Storytelling with Puppets	characters, actions, emotions	Moderate to High	Enhanced understanding through narrative context
Board Games (e.g., memory card games)	colors, numbers, daily objects	High (competitive, focused)	Encouraged word recognition and recall
Song and Movement	body parts, verbs, weather	Very High (energetic, joyful)	Strengthened word retention through music and repetition
Picture-Based Bingo	animals, fruits, shapes	Moderate	Supported word-image association

The table above illustrates that each type of play not only introduces learners to specific vocabulary categories but also varies in terms of engagement levels and the nature of vocabulary development. For example, songs and movement-based activities were especially effective for young learners who are kinesthetic and auditory, as they linked rhythm and motion to meaning. These observations align with Nation’s view that vocabulary is better acquired through repeated and varied exposure.

Additionally, play settings offer a stress-free environment in which learners are encouraged to take risks and use new words without the fear of making mistakes. According to Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, learners progress best when they are scaffolded by more knowledgeable others in interactive environments. (Bodrova & Leong, 2024) Playful learning creates that exact condition, where peers and teachers provide language input naturally through collaboration.<sup>4</sup>

Another key finding was that teachers who planned purposeful play activities—where vocabulary targets were embedded intentionally—saw better vocabulary outcomes. Teachers’ roles in guiding, modeling, and reinforcing vocabulary during play were fundamental to its success. Neuman and Wright assert that vocabulary growth is maximized when playful instruction is deliberately structured with linguistic goals.<sup>5</sup> In this study, those teachers who combined open-ended play with specific word targets were more successful than those who relied on free play alone.

The enthusiasm and sustained attention demonstrated by children during play-based sessions also contributed to more effective vocabulary acquisition. This finding echoes Jalongo and Hirsch’s position that learner motivation is a central component in early language development.<sup>6</sup> High levels of participation observed in role-play and movement-based games indicated that play supports both affective and cognitive engagement. When students are emotionally involved, their brains are more likely to store and recall vocabulary effectively.

From a developmental perspective, play-based learning fits the natural inclinations of young children who learn through discovery, imagination, and social interaction. Pyle and Danniels note that play connects directly with how young children process the world—making it not only enjoyable, but educationally effective.<sup>7</sup> Through the synergy of language and action, play-based pedagogy becomes an optimal medium for vocabulary learning.



However, the study also uncovered challenges. Some teachers reported institutional barriers such as rigid schedules, large class sizes, and a lack of resources. These limitations reflect Fisher et al.'s findings that despite the benefits, systemic constraints often hinder the broader application of play-based learning. For such approaches to thrive, supportive policies, teacher training, and curriculum flexibility are needed.

## CONCLUSION

The research findings indicate that teachers frequently employ a range of play-based activities to enhance English vocabulary development in young learners. Commonly used methods include role-playing, singing songs with gestures, storytelling, flashcard games, and vocabulary-related puzzles. These activities not only aim to introduce new words but also reinforce their usage in interactive and meaningful contexts. By incorporating movement, visuals, and repetition, teachers create multisensory experiences that help children remember and understand vocabulary more effectively.

In terms of learner response, young children generally show high levels of enthusiasm and engagement during play-based vocabulary activities. They participate actively, demonstrate curiosity, and often exhibit improved confidence in using new words. The playful nature of the activities helps reduce learning anxiety and builds a positive emotional connection to the language learning process. This encourages learners to take initiative, collaborate with peers, and apply vocabulary in spontaneous situations within the classroom.

Overall, the study supports the idea that play-based learning is an effective approach for vocabulary acquisition in early English language education. It not only promotes linguistic development but also nurtures creativity, social interaction, and emotional well-being. As such, educators are encouraged to integrate structured play into their teaching strategies to support both the cognitive and affective development of young learners in learning English vocabulary.

## SUGGESTIONS

Based on the findings, it is recommended that teachers consistently incorporate a variety of play-based activities in vocabulary instruction for young learners. Selecting activities that are age-appropriate, interactive, and culturally relevant will maximize student engagement and learning outcomes. Teachers should also consider aligning these activities with specific learning objectives to ensure that vocabulary acquisition is both purposeful and measurable. Regular use of songs, games, storytelling, and visual aids can make vocabulary learning more enjoyable and effective.

Furthermore, educational institutions and curriculum developers are encouraged to provide training and resources that support the implementation of play-based learning. Workshops, teaching materials, and classroom models can help teachers design and adapt creative activities that fit their students' needs. By fostering a supportive environment for play-based instruction, schools can enhance both the quality of language learning and the overall classroom experience for young learners.

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