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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF GAME-BASED LEARNING IN TEACHING ENGLISH VOCABULARY TO YOUNG LEARNERS

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Abstract

Vocabulary knowledge is essential to young learners' development in English because words provide the building blocks for listening comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing. However, primary school pupils may find vocabulary learning difficult when instruction relies heavily on memorisation, translation, or repetitive written exercises. Game-based learning offers an alternative by placing vocabulary practice within structured, goal-oriented, and interactive activities. This article examines the pedagogical effectiveness of game-based learning for teaching English vocabulary to young learners through a narrative synthesis of relevant research and theoretical literature. It discusses how games may support attention, retrieval practice, meaningful repetition, peer interaction, and motivation, while also considering limitations related to competition, classroom management, accessibility, and the transfer of game performance to independent language use. Drawing on reviews of game-based English learning and vocabulary instruction, the article proposes practical principles for selecting, adapting, and assessing vocabulary games in primary English classrooms. It argues that games are most useful when they are aligned with explicit learning objectives, include repeated encounters with target words, and are followed by activities that require learners to use vocabulary beyond the game itself. The article concludes that game-based learning should be treated as a purposeful pedagogical approach rather than entertainment added to a lesson.

Keywords: game-based learning, English vocabulary, young learners, primary education, EFL, vocabulary retention, learner motivation

1. Introduction

Vocabulary is a central component of language learning. Learners need to recognise words when listening and reading and retrieve them when speaking and writing. At the primary level, vocabulary knowledge supports classroom participation and gives children the language needed to talk about familiar people, objects, actions, places, and experiences. When learners know too few words, even simple communicative tasks can become difficult. For this reason, vocabulary instruction should be systematic, engaging, and connected to opportunities for repeated use.

Young learners do not always respond well to lessons dominated by explanation, copying, and memorisation. Their attention, confidence, and participation may improve when learning involves movement, visual support, social interaction, and achievable challenges. Games can provide these conditions by giving learners a clear goal and a reason to retrieve and use target words. Examples include picture matching, guessing games, information-gap activities, word races, board games, vocabulary bingo, and digital quizzes.

Nevertheless, the presence of a game does not automatically make learning effective. A game may be entertaining but provide little meaningful practice, or it may reward speed rather than accurate language use. Teachers therefore need to consider what learners should know by the end of the activity, how often target words will be encountered, and how learning will be checked. The purpose of this article is to examine the potential effectiveness of game-based learning in teaching English vocabulary to young learners, identify conditions that support its value, and offer practical guidance for classroom implementation. This is a literature-based conceptual article and does not report original experimental data.

2. Understanding Game-Based Vocabulary Learning

Game-based learning refers to the use of a structured game as a context for achieving learning objectives. In vocabulary instruction, the game should require learners to notice, recognise, retrieve, interpret, or use target words. It differs from gamification, which typically adds game-like elements—such as points, badges, levels, or leaderboards—to an activity that is not itself a game. Both approaches may be useful, but they should not be treated as identical.

A vocabulary game normally includes a goal, rules, actions, feedback, and some form of challenge. For example, in a picture-guessing game, one learner describes an object while others identify it. The task can practise semantic knowledge, descriptive language, listening, and turn-taking. In vocabulary bingo, pupils listen to words and locate matching pictures or written forms. A word-building game may focus on spelling and letter patterns. Each game should be selected according to the vocabulary objective rather than novelty alone.

Vocabulary knowledge itself is multidimensional. Learners may recognise a word without being able to pronounce it, spell it, explain it, or use it in a sentence. Nation (2001) distinguishes aspects of word knowledge, including form, meaning, and use. Consequently, effective instruction should provide opportunities to meet vocabulary in different ways. A single matching game may support recognition, but learners may also need pronunciation practice, contextualised examples, and productive tasks to develop more complete knowledge.

3. Theoretical Rationale for Using Games

3.1. Attention, engagement, and motivation

Games can create a purposeful context in which learners want to participate. Clear goals, manageable challenges, visual materials, and immediate feedback can help sustain attention. Research reviews of game-based English learning among young learners report that vocabulary is one of the most common learning targets and that motivation and engagement are frequently discussed benefits (Saputra et al., 2021; Yieng & Abdul Aziz, 2022). A more recent systematic review of primary EFL serious games likewise reports favourable vocabulary outcomes and positive affective findings across the studies it examined, while identifying limitations in the range of skills assessed and in long-term evidence (Tacoronte Sosa, 2026).

Motivation, however, should not be confused with achievement. Pupils may enjoy an activity without retaining the vocabulary, and excitement can sometimes distract from the target language. Teachers should therefore use engagement as a means of supporting learning, not as the sole indicator of success. A brief exit task or delayed review can help determine whether pupils can recall and use the words after the game has ended.

3.2. Retrieval practice and meaningful repetition

Vocabulary learning benefits from repeated encounters with words over time. Games can encourage retrieval because learners must recall a word's form or meaning in order to make progress. In a guessing game, for example, pupils repeatedly retrieve words from semantic clues; in a board game, they may answer questions or produce sentences each time they land on a square. Repetition is particularly useful when it is varied and requires active recall rather than passive exposure.

A meta-analysis by Thompson and von Gillern (2020), which reviewed 19 studies and 20 effect sizes, found an overall positive effect for video-game-based instruction on English vocabulary acquisition, while also noting variability across studies. This finding supports the potential of games but does not mean that every game will produce the same result. Outcomes depend on such factors as the design of the game, the target vocabulary, the learners, and the duration and quality of instruction.

3.3. Context, interaction, and multimodal support

Games can connect words with pictures, actions, sounds, objects, and social situations. Such multimodal support is useful for children who are still developing literacy skills or who benefit from concrete examples. In a classroom game about food, learners may see pictures, hear the words, sort items into categories, and use expressions such as "I like…" or "I don't like…". The vocabulary is thereby practised through more than one channel.

Peer games can also create opportunities for learners to hear classmates, ask for clarification, negotiate rules, and use language to achieve a shared goal. These interactions can move vocabulary practice beyond isolated word recognition. Nevertheless, the teacher must ensure that the task requires the target language; otherwise, pupils may complete the game through guessing or through their first language without sufficiently engaging with English.

4. What Does the Research Suggest?

Research on game-based English learning has grown, particularly in primary and elementary education. Saputra et al. (2021) reviewed 30 studies and found that game-based English learning was commonly implemented at elementary level, with vocabulary among the most frequently targeted areas. Yieng and Abdul Aziz (2022) reviewed 15 studies published from 2016 to 2021 on games for vocabulary and spelling in primary school. Their review identified pupil background, classroom context, timing, learning topic, goals, and game features as relevant considerations in selecting and using games.

Evidence from broader digital-game research is also encouraging. Thompson and von Gillern (2020) reported a moderately large overall effect in favour of video-game-based instruction for English vocabulary acquisition, although effects varied between studies. This variation is important: it cautions against assuming that the technology or game format alone explains learning outcomes. A digital quiz, a collaborative board game, and a movement-based guessing activity differ in the kind of processing and interaction they require.

Recent reviews also suggest that vocabulary learning should not be evaluated only through immediate recognition. Umme (2024), in a systematic review of primary-school English vocabulary instruction, found that multimodal instruction, application, and definitional

approaches were common across the studies examined. This supports combining explicit teaching with contextualised application rather than relying on a game as the only instructional method. Tacoronte Sosa (2026) similarly notes that primary EFL serious-game research has focused heavily on vocabulary, with less attention to productive skills and long-term outcomes.

Taken together, the literature suggests that game-based learning can be a valuable component of vocabulary instruction, but the strength of the evidence varies by context and design. The most defensible conclusion is not that games are universally superior to all other methods, but that well-designed games can provide additional opportunities for practice, engagement, and retrieval when integrated with explicit teaching, meaningful language use, and assessment.

5. Principles for Effective Game-Based Vocabulary Instruction

5.1. Align the game with a precise learning objective

Before choosing a game, teachers should decide what pupils should learn. Is the goal to recognise spoken words, match written forms to pictures, remember spelling, distinguish related meanings, or use vocabulary in sentences? The objective should guide the game mechanics and the assessment. For example, if the objective is to use adjectives orally, a game that only asks pupils to select pictures may be insufficient; learners should also describe, compare, or guess items using the target adjectives.

5.2. Select age- and level-appropriate games

The rules should be simple enough for pupils to understand quickly, and the language demand should be challenging but achievable. For younger or beginner learners, picture cards, gestures, objects, and modelling can reduce unnecessary cognitive load. Older or more proficient pupils may be ready for word puzzles, definition games, category challenges, and collaborative problem-solving. Teachers should consider class size, available time, literacy levels, and accessibility when selecting activities.

5.3. Build in repeated retrieval and spaced review

A useful game gives pupils several opportunities to encounter and retrieve target words. Instead of introducing a word once and moving on, teachers can revisit it through different formats: picture matching, oral guessing, sentence completion, and a later review game. Vocabulary should also be revisited in subsequent lessons. This helps move learning beyond a single successful performance during the activity.

5.4. Balance cooperation and competition

Competition can create energy, but public rankings and speed-based scoring may discourage pupils who need more processing time. Cooperative goals can be more inclusive: groups may earn points for accurate answers, clear explanations, teamwork, or improvement. Teachers can vary team composition, rotate roles, and ensure that every pupil has a meaningful contribution. The aim is to encourage effort and language use rather than label pupils as winners and losers.

5.5. Connect the game to communication

Games should lead to meaningful use of vocabulary. After a matching activity, pupils might describe a picture, ask a partner questions, write a short sentence, or use the words in a mini-story. These follow-up activities help teachers assess whether pupils can transfer vocabulary from the game to another context. They also ensure that the game contributes to broader language development rather than isolated performance.

6. Practical Classroom Model: Teaching Vocabulary through Games

The following model illustrates how a teacher can organise a 35–40-minute vocabulary lesson on the topic “Food and Drinks”. It can be adapted to other themes such as animals, clothes, classroom objects, weather, or daily routines.

Stage 1 — Introduce and model (5–7 minutes). Present six to ten target words using pictures or real objects. Model pronunciation, check meaning, and invite pupils to repeat. Keep the vocabulary set manageable and connect new words with learners’ existing knowledge.

Stage 2 — Guided recognition game (7 minutes). In pairs, pupils play picture-word matching. Each pair must say the word aloud before placing a card. The teacher monitors pronunciation and checks that pupils are not relying only on visual matching.

Stage 3 — Retrieval game (8–10 minutes). Play “What’s Missing?” Display the cards, ask pupils to name them, then remove one card while pupils close their eyes. Pupils identify the missing item and, where possible, use it in a sentence.

The game can be made more demanding by asking for a category or a descriptive clue.

Stage 4 — Communicative application (8–10 minutes). Pupils interview a partner using prompts such as “What food do you like?” and “What do you drink for breakfast?” They record or report one partner response. This stage requires learners to retrieve vocabulary in a communicative context.

Stage 5 — Assessment and reflection (3–5 minutes). Pupils complete a short exit task: identify three pictures, spell one word, and use one target word in a sentence. The teacher records which words require further review. A brief game at the beginning of the next lesson can revisit the same vocabulary.

This sequence combines explicit instruction, recognition, retrieval, production, and formative assessment. It also provides a practical way to check the distinction between enjoying a game and actually learning the target vocabulary.

7. Challenges and Limitations

Several limitations need attention. First, games can become noisy or difficult to manage if rules, transitions, and time limits are unclear. Teachers should model the activity, demonstrate an example round, assign materials managers when necessary, and use a consistent signal to stop and refocus the class.

Second, some games reward speed more than accuracy or understanding. Learners may guess, copy peers, or focus on points rather than vocabulary. Teachers can address this by asking pupils to explain answers, pronounce words, use them in sentences, or justify a category choice. Scoring should reward meaningful language use and not only fast responses.

Third, learners differ in confidence, processing speed, literacy, and physical or sensory needs. Activities should offer different ways to participate, including oral responses, picture selection, card handling, or collaborative roles. Digital games should not be assumed to be more

effective than non-digital games; device access, internet reliability, screen time, and teacher familiarity all affect feasibility.

Fourth, the evidence base has limitations. Studies vary in age groups, vocabulary targets, game types, instructional duration, and outcome measures, making direct comparisons difficult. Some research focuses on immediate post-tests, while less is known about long-term retention and transfer to spontaneous speaking and writing. More classroom-based research is needed across diverse educational contexts, including settings where English is taught as a foreign language with limited exposure outside school.

Finally, games should complement rather than replace explicit instruction, reading, storytelling, conversation, and spaced review. A game can introduce or reinforce vocabulary, but a complete learning sequence must provide opportunities to encounter words in meaningful texts and use them for authentic purposes.

8. Conclusion

Game-based learning can make a meaningful contribution to teaching English vocabulary to young learners by creating opportunities for attention, active retrieval, repeated exposure, multimodal learning, and peer interaction. Reviews of the literature and meta-analytic evidence suggest that game-based approaches can support vocabulary learning, although outcomes vary and further research is needed on long-term retention and productive use.

The effectiveness of a vocabulary game depends on its pedagogical design. Teachers should align games with clear objectives, choose activities appropriate to pupils' age and proficiency, provide repeated encounters with target words, balance competition with cooperation, and assess learning beyond the game itself. A well-planned lesson combines games with explicit modelling, communicative application, and later review. In this way, games are not merely entertaining additions to the classroom; they become purposeful tools for helping young learners build usable English vocabulary.

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