



The Use of Language Games in Enhancing English Vocabulary Mastery of Fourth-Grade Elementary School Students at Sultan Iskandar Muda

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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary mastery is essential in English learning, especially for elementary students in EFL contexts. However, many learners face difficulties in understanding, retaining, and using vocabulary due to conventional teaching methods that rely heavily on memorization. This study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of language games in improving students' vocabulary mastery, identify the most effective types of games, and analyze their impact on motivation and classroom participation. The research used Classroom Action Research (CAR) based on the Kemmis and McTaggart model, involving planning, action, observation, and reflection. It was conducted at SD Sultan Iskandar Muda with 40 fourth-grade students. Data were collected through pre-tests and post-tests, observations, interviews, and documentation, and analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The results showed significant improvement in vocabulary achievement, with mean scores increasing from 58.4 (pre-test) to 68.7 (Cycle I) and 82.3 (Cycle II). The percentage of students achieving the Minimum Mastery Criteria (KKM) rose from 30% to 55% and then 85%. Qualitative findings revealed that games such as word matching, memory cards, guessing games, and role-play effectively enhanced vocabulary retention, motivation, participation, and students' confidence in learning.

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INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary mastery plays a fundamental role in language learning, particularly for young learners in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, because vocabulary serves as the primary tool for communication in both spoken and written forms (Tuilan et al., 2025). Without sufficient vocabulary knowledge, learners will find it difficult to express their ideas, share opinions, or even understand simple instructions, regardless of how well they understand grammar rules (Nation, 2022). In this sense, vocabulary is not only a component of language learning but also the foundation upon which all

other language skills are built. For young learners, especially at the elementary school level, vocabulary acquisition becomes even more crucial because it determines their ability to engage with the language from the very beginning (Wang & Reynolds, 2024). When students are equipped with adequate vocabulary, they are more likely to participate actively in classroom activities, respond to teachers' questions, and interact with their peers using the target language, which ultimately supports their overall language development.

Emphasizes that vocabulary plays a central role in shaping learners' communicative competence, as it directly influences their ability to convey meaning clearly and effectively in various situations (Faisal, 2025). Students who have a broader vocabulary range tend to be more confident when speaking and writing, as they can choose appropriate words to express their thoughts (Ceneciro et al., 2023). In contrast, students with limited vocabulary often experience hesitation, confusion, and anxiety when trying to communicate, which can negatively impact their learning motivation. This lack of confidence may lead students to avoid participating in classroom discussions or practicing the language altogether, thereby limiting their opportunities to improve (Gunawan et al., 2025). Therefore, vocabulary mastery is closely linked not only to linguistic ability but also to psychological factors such as confidence, motivation, and willingness to communicate.

In addition, Naderiheshi (2022) points out that limited vocabulary significantly hinders students' ability to comprehend texts and spoken language, which are essential components of language learning (Baharudin et al., 2024). When students encounter unfamiliar words in reading passages or listening activities, they often struggle to understand the overall meaning, even if they recognize some parts of the content. This difficulty can lead to frustration, reduced interest in learning, and eventually poor academic performance in English (He & Joy, 2026). Moreover, students who lack vocabulary knowledge tend to rely heavily on teachers' explanations or translation, rather than developing their own strategies for understanding meaning (Hu & Gao, 2021). This dependency can slow down their learning progress and prevent them from becoming independent learners who are capable of interpreting language on their own.

Vocabulary knowledge also plays a vital role in supporting the development of the four main language skills: reading, listening, speaking, and writing, which are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. (Lin, 2023) explain that vocabulary acts as a bridge that connects these skills, as each skill requires a sufficient level of lexical knowledge to function effectively. In reading and listening, vocabulary helps learners decode and interpret meaning, enabling them to understand messages conveyed through texts and spoken language. In speaking and writing, vocabulary allows learners to express ideas, construct sentences, and communicate their thoughts in a coherent manner (Siregar, 2025). Without adequate vocabulary, students may struggle

to develop these skills simultaneously, resulting in an imbalance in their overall language proficiency.

For elementary school students, early vocabulary acquisition is particularly important because it lays the foundation for more advanced language learning in the future. States that young learners have a high capacity for absorbing new information, including vocabulary, especially when it is presented in an engaging and meaningful way (Hidayatullah et al., 2025). At this stage, students are more likely to remember words when they are associated with real-life contexts, visual aids, or interactive activities that stimulate their interest. Therefore, providing effective vocabulary instruction at the elementary level is essential to ensure that students build a strong linguistic base that will support their continued learning as they progress to higher levels of education.

In the Indonesian context, English is taught as a foreign language, which means that students have limited exposure to English outside the classroom environment. Most students use Bahasa Indonesia or local languages in their daily communication, and English is typically encountered only during school hours. As a result, the classroom becomes the main setting where students learn and practice English vocabulary. However, this limited exposure often makes it challenging for students to retain and apply new vocabulary, as they do not have enough opportunities to use the language in authentic situations. This condition highlights the importance of creating a classroom environment that maximizes students' engagement and provides meaningful opportunities for vocabulary practice.

Based on observations conducted at Sultan Iskandar Muda Elementary School, it was found that fourth-grade students still face significant challenges in mastering English vocabulary, particularly in terms of remembering, understanding, and applying words in appropriate contexts. Many students tend to forget vocabulary quickly after learning it, which indicates that their learning process is not sufficiently meaningful or engaging. In addition, students often struggle to use vocabulary in sentences or real communication, suggesting that they may memorize words without fully understanding their meanings or usage. This problem reflects a gap between vocabulary knowledge and its practical application in communication.

Furthermore, the teaching methods commonly used in the classroom still rely heavily on traditional approaches such as memorization, repetition, and translation, which may not effectively support long-term vocabulary retention. While these methods can help students recall words temporarily, they do not encourage deep understanding or active use of vocabulary in meaningful contexts. (Bavishi et al., 2022) argue that such approaches tend to promote passive learning, where students simply receive information without actively engaging with it. In addition, external factors such as the dominance of the first language, lack of authentic English input, and limited

opportunities for practice further hinder students' ability to develop their vocabulary. Also note that students often learn vocabulary only for examination purposes, rather than for real-life communication (Islam & Stapa, 2021).

Considering these challenges, it is necessary to implement more innovative and engaging teaching strategies that can enhance students' vocabulary mastery effectively. One promising approach is the use of language games, which provide a fun, interactive, and low-anxiety learning environment that encourages students to participate actively in the learning process. Language games allow students to practice vocabulary repeatedly in meaningful contexts, making it easier for them to remember and apply new words. (Wahyuni et al., 2023) explains that language games can increase students' motivation and engagement, while (Rahmawati et al., 2025) adds that they support key aspects of language learning, including meaningful input, meaningful output, language-focused learning, and fluency development. Therefore, this study proposes the integration of various types of language games within a Classroom Action Research (CAR) framework as an innovative solution to improve vocabulary mastery, motivation, and participation among fourth-grade students at Sultan Iskandar Muda Elementary School, as well as to identify the most effective types of games for young learners in the Indonesian EFL context.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed Classroom Action Research (CAR) to improve the English vocabulary mastery of fourth-grade students through language games. The research adopted the Kemmis and McTaggart model, which consists of four stages: planning, action, observation, and reflection. In the planning stage, the researcher identified students' vocabulary difficulties and prepared lesson plans and language game activities. The action stage involved implementing the activities, while the observation stage focused on recording students' participation and vocabulary development. The reflection stage was conducted to evaluate the results and make improvements for the next cycle.

The subjects of this study were 40 fourth-grade students of Sultan Iskandar Muda Elementary School in Medan, consisting of 20 male and 20 female students. Data were collected through vocabulary tests, observations, interviews, and documentation. The vocabulary tests were used to measure students' achievement before and after the implementation of language games, while observations and interviews provided information about students' participation and responses during the learning process. The data were analyzed using quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative analysis was conducted by calculating the mean scores and percentage of improvement from the pre-test and post-test results. Qualitative analysis was used to describe students' engagement, participation, and responses toward the use of language games.

The combination of these methods provided a comprehensive evaluation of the effectiveness of language games in improving students' vocabulary mastery.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Effectiveness of Language Games In Enhancing Students' Vocabulary Mastery

The pre-test was administered before the implementation of language games to measure students' initial vocabulary mastery. The results indicated that most fourth-grade students at SD Sultan Iskandar Muda had limited English vocabulary mastery. Many students faced difficulties in recognizing word meanings, spelling words correctly, and using vocabulary in simple contexts. The average pre-test score showed that students' vocabulary mastery was below the expected minimum standard.

The post-test was administered after the implementation of language games. The results showed a significant improvement in students' vocabulary mastery. Students were able to identify word meanings more accurately, apply vocabulary in simple sentences, and demonstrate better understanding during learning activities. The increase in the average post-test score indicates that Post-test is conducted after the implementation of language games.

Table 2.
Students' Vocabulary Achievement Improvement Across Pre-Test and Post-Tests

Test	Mean score	Percentage of Students Achieving KKM (75)
Pre-Test	58.4	30%
Post- Test Cycle I	68.7	55%
Post- Test Cycle II	82.3	85%

The table shows a significant improvement in students' achievement from the pre-test to Post-test Cycle II. In the pre-test, the mean score was 58.4, and only 30% of the students achieved the Minimum Mastery Criteria (KKM) score of 75. This indicates that most students had not yet reached the expected level of performance before the treatment was implemented.

In Post-test Cycle I, the mean score increased to 68.7, and the percentage of students achieving the KKM rose to 55%. This improvement suggests that the first cycle of the intervention had a positive impact on students' learning outcomes, although nearly half of the students were still below the mastery level. In Post-test Cycle II, there was a substantial improvement. The mean score increased to 82.3, and 85% of the students achieved the KKM. This result indicates that the intervention was highly effective in improving students' performance, as the majority of students successfully met or exceeded the minimum mastery criteria. Overall, the data demonstrate

continuous and significant progress across the three stages, showing that the implemented strategy effectively enhanced students' learning achievement.

Interview Results

Interviews conducted with the English teacher and selected students revealed positive responses toward the use of language games. Students stated that learning English through games was fun and reduced their anxiety. The teacher also reported that language games helped improve students' motivation and classroom engagement. The interview results in students' responses and learning behavior after the implementation of the strategy. Before the implementation, most students admitted that they had difficulties understanding the material and lacked confidence in participating in classroom activities. One student stated, "I did not really understand the lesson before, and I was afraid to answer the teacher's questions." Another student said, "I was shy and worried about making mistakes, so I preferred to stay silent." They also mentioned that they were passive during the lesson. This condition was consistent with the pre-test result, in which only 30% of the students achieved the KKM.

After the implementation in Cycle I, students reported that the learning process became more interesting and interactive. One student commented, "The activities were more fun and helped me understand the material better." Another student explained, "I started to feel more confident, but sometimes I still needed help from my friends and teacher." Although some students still needed more practice, they began to participate more actively in classroom activities. This finding aligns with the quantitative data showing improvement in the mean score (68.7) and 55% of students achieving the KKM.

In Cycle II, the majority of students expressed that they felt more confident and comfortable during the learning process. One student stated, "Now I am not afraid to speak in front of the class." Another student said, "I can understand the lesson clearly, and my score is better than before." Students also mentioned that the activities helped them practice and improve their performance. This positive change corresponds with the significant increase in the mean score (82.3) and 85% of students achieving the KKM.

From the teacher's perspective, it was observed that students became more active and enthusiastic. The teacher stated, "Compared to the beginning, students are now more confident and willing to participate. Their scores have improved significantly." The teacher confirmed that the implemented strategy effectively enhanced students' engagement and academic achievement.

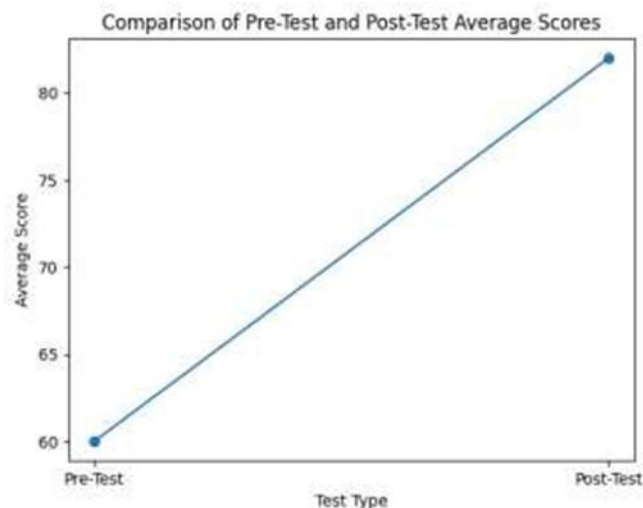


Figure 2.

Comparison of Students' Average Scores in Pre-Test and Post-Test

Improvement of Students' Vocabulary Mastery

The comparison between pre-test and post-test results showed a clear improvement in students' vocabulary mastery. This improvement can be seen from the increase in mean scores and the higher number of students achieving better results after the implementation of language games. The improvement was also visually represented through a graph showing the comparison between pre-test and post-test average scores, which illustrates a noticeable upward trend.

Based on the observation results, students showed positive behavior during the learning process using language games. They were more active, enthusiastic, and willing to participate in classroom activities. Students interacted more with their peers and showed increased confidence in using English vocabulary during the games.

Types of Language Games that Are Most Effective in Improving Vocabulary Retention and Usage

Based on the findings of this research, the most effective types of language games for improving vocabulary retention and usage among fourth-grade students are those that combine repetition, visual support, active participation, and meaningful communication. At the elementary level, students learn better through concrete and interactive experiences rather than abstract explanations. Therefore, games that involve visual materials, direct engagement, and enjoyable learning situations are more suitable. For example, word matching games help students connect words with their meanings through pictures, strengthening memory through visual association. Similarly, memory card games promote repeated exposure and recall, allowing students to review vocabulary multiple times in a fun and engaging way, which supports long-term retention.

In addition, guessing games and simple role-play activities are also highly effective in enhancing vocabulary usage. Guessing games encourage students to think

critically and use contextual clues, while role-play allows them to apply vocabulary in real-life situations. These activities not only improve understanding but also build students' confidence in using English words in communication. Overall, language games that integrate repetition, visualization, and contextual practice create an engaging learning environment and significantly improve both vocabulary retention and practical usage among fourth-grade students.

The Influence of Language Games on Students' Motivation and Participation in Vocabulary Learning Activities

Language games have a significant positive influence on students' motivation, participation, and self-confidence in vocabulary learning activities. Based on the findings of this research, the implementation of language games created a noticeable change in students' attitudes toward learning English vocabulary. Prior to the use of games, several students showed low interest and limited engagement during the lesson (Liu et al., 2025). However, after language games were introduced, students demonstrated greater enthusiasm, willingness to participate, and active involvement in classroom activities. This indicates that game-based learning strategies are effective in fostering a more engaging and student-centered learning environment. In particular, language games significantly increase students' learning motivation by creating an enjoyable, relaxed, and low-pressure atmosphere. Unlike traditional methods that rely on memorization and repetition, games allow students to learn while playing, making the process feel fun rather than obligatory. Elements such as competition, rewards, and collaboration further enhance both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, encouraging students to engage more actively in vocabulary learning.

In addition, language games enhance students' active participation in the classroom. Conventional teaching methods often limit participation to a few students, leaving others passive. In contrast, game-based activities require all students to be involved through tasks such as matching words, guessing meanings, or performing short dialogues. These activities promote interaction, critical thinking, and peer collaboration, making the classroom atmosphere more lively and communicative. As a result, students are not only receiving information but also actively constructing their understanding of vocabulary. This increased participation ensures that learning becomes more meaningful and helps students retain vocabulary more effectively.

language games contribute significantly to the development of students' self-confidence and help create a positive learning environment. The relaxed and informal nature of games reduces students' fear of making mistakes, allowing them to take risks in using new vocabulary without feeling judged. Repeated practice through engaging activities strengthens their confidence in speaking and applying English words. At the same time, an interactive and enjoyable classroom atmosphere encourages focus, cooperation, and mutual support among students. Consequently, vocabulary learning

becomes more effective and enjoyable. Overall, language games play a crucial role in enhancing students' motivation, participation, confidence, and engagement in vocabulary learning activities.

Discussion

The findings of this research demonstrate that the use of language games effectively enhanced students' English vocabulary mastery. The improvement in students' test scores, supported by observation, interview, and questionnaire data, indicates that language games provide a meaningful and enjoyable learning experience for students. During the implementation of language games, students were actively involved in the learning process. They practiced vocabulary through repetition, interaction, and contextual usage, which helped them understand and remember new words more effectively.

These findings are consistent with the theory proposed by Wright, Betteridge, and Buckby (2013) who state that language games can help learners practice language in a relaxed and motivating atmosphere. Games allow students to use language in meaningful contexts while reducing anxiety in the learning process. Similarly, (Adipat et al., 2021) explains that games can encourage student participation and make the learning process more engaging, especially for young learners.

Furthermore, the findings of this study are consistent with previous research conducted by (Ahmed et al., 2022), which revealed that the use of games in vocabulary learning can significantly enhance students' ability to retain and understand new words. Uberman also argues that games assist learners in memorizing vocabulary more effectively because they create an enjoyable and interactive learning environment.

Similarly, (Gómez & Cedeño, 2025) highlights that young learners achieve better vocabulary acquisition when they are actively involved in communicative and playful learning activities. Language games provide learners with opportunities to use vocabulary in a more natural and meaningful context, thereby supporting the process of vocabulary acquisition.

In addition, this study found that the use of language games improved students' motivation and self-confidence in learning English. Students became more enthusiastic and more willing to take part in classroom activities. This finding is in line with (Ramzan et al., 2023), who states that language games can enhance learner motivation by fostering a fun classroom atmosphere and encouraging interaction among students.

Based on the findings and discussion, it can be concluded that students' vocabulary mastery in English improved significantly after the implementation of language games. These games not only helped students understand and retain vocabulary more effectively, but also increased their motivation, participation, and confidence in learning English. Furthermore, the classroom environment became more active, enjoyable, and learner-centered.

CONCLUSION

The results and discussion of this study demonstrate that the objectives stated in the Introduction have been successfully achieved. The initial problem identified was students' low vocabulary mastery and limited engagement in learning English, which required an innovative and interactive teaching strategy. Through the implementation of language games within the Classroom Action Research framework, the findings show a significant improvement in students' vocabulary scores, participation, and motivation. This indicates a strong alignment between the research objectives, the applied method, and the outcomes obtained, confirming that the use of language games effectively addresses the identified learning problems and enhances vocabulary mastery among elementary students.

Furthermore, the findings of this study open opportunities for the development and wider application of game-based learning strategies in English language teaching. The positive results suggest that language games can be adapted and implemented not only at the elementary level but also in higher levels of education or in teaching other language skills such as speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Future studies are encouraged to explore more diverse types of games, integrate digital or technology-based platforms, and examine long-term impacts on students' language proficiency. Therefore, this research provides both practical implications for classroom teaching and a foundation for further research in the field of innovative language learning methods.

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