

Teacher's Strategies, Perceptions, and Challenges in Game-Based Vocabulary Teaching for Kindergarten Students

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ABSTRACT

This study examines teachers' strategies, perceptions, and challenges in implementing game-based English vocabulary teaching in kindergarten. It used a qualitative approach, and the data were obtained through analysis of a lesson plan and a semi-structured interview with a teacher at a kindergarten in Semarang City. The results showed that the teacher used various strategies such as interactive games, songs, flashcards, and repetition activities to support students' vocabulary acquisition. The teacher perceived game-based teaching as an effective method to create a more fun learning environment and increase student engagement. However, challenges in implementing game-based vocabulary teaching arise when students become too focused on the game, making it difficult to return their focus to the learning material. This finding highlights the importance of careful planning when implementing game-based learning. This study recommends further research into the long-term impact of game-based strategies.

Keywords: challenges, game, kindergarten students, perceptions, vocabulary

INTRODUCTION

Language is an essential foundation for communication. For early childhood language acquisition, vocabulary is crucial for children as it plays a role in their ability to communicate, understand others, and engage in social interaction. According to Piaget, children learn and develop through active interaction with the environment around them (Piaget, 1953).

In the context of vocabulary learning for kindergarten children, they learn and develop their language skills through play. Playing can be an effective method for vocabulary learning using games (Albertovna, 2023). By playing, the learning atmosphere can become more enjoyable. Play is not only a fun activity but also interactive. Various games, such as role-play, bingo, storytelling, and word matching, can help children understand and remember vocabulary more fun. By applying games in vocabulary learning, children can learn new items, practice their usage in context, and internalize meanings through interactive and multi-sensory experiences (Alotaibi, 2024).

Many studies have discussed games in vocabulary learning, such as Sihombing (2023), who found that Pictionary games effectively increase students' English vocabulary. Another similar finding was also reported by Andreani and Ying (2019) through the game "PowPow". The positive role of teaching vocabulary through digital games was demonstrated by Hazar (2020). In addition, Li (2021) also confirmed that game-based vocabulary learning could increase students' motivation, achievement, and confidence. Another study by Tang (2023) found that games such as flashcards and driving games can effectively help students' vocabulary acquisition. Then, with their systematic review, Ling and Aziz (2022) concluded that game-based learning strategies improve vocabulary learning retention and motivation.

In addition, Hidayah et al. (2023) demonstrated the success in applying game-based teaching, which suggested that the game-based teaching method is a more interactive and enjoyable learning approach and effectively improves students' vocabulary mastery. Not only digital games, but traditional games also have their effectiveness, as confirmed by

Naderi and Moafian (2023), who wrote that technology should not make us overlook the benefits of non-digital activities and games in language education environments. In addition, various studies reveal the benefits of traditional and board games for children's cognitive and social development (Vita-Barrull et al., 2024). Another study about a traditional game was conducted by Zikriyati and Syafei (2018) using the 'Snakes and Ladders' game. They found that all the components used in the game are safe for the students, and learning becomes more fun. These studies are reinforced by the findings from Mwinsa and Dagada (2025), which suggested that traditional games significantly improved social skills such as resilience, self-esteem, confidence, cooperation, and problem-solving. Students' interaction with their peers during play-based activities helped them develop social skills and emotional stability.

In the Indonesian context, research from Susanto et al. (2022) emphasised the importance of developing traditional game-based learning models to increase student activeness and engagement. Their study showed positive results that local games can be a relevant and effective medium in early childhood learning. In the kindergarten classroom, teachers play a crucial role in selecting, designing, and facilitating games for learning activities. The effectiveness of game-based learning is influenced by teachers' pedagogical choices, classroom management skills, and understanding of child development. Therefore, understanding the teacher's strategies in applying the game is important for advancing research and practice in early childhood education.

Despite the benefits of game-based learning, its integration into vocabulary teaching in kindergarten is often limited by institutional, curricular, and logistical constraints. The need for further research into what strategies the teacher used in the context of game-based vocabulary learning in the classroom, the challenges faced by the teacher in the real world, and their perceptions about this method is becoming increasingly evident.

Much literature has supported game-based vocabulary learning in early childhood education. However, most of the existing research remained largely theoretical or limited to

learning outcomes, often unable to describe the overall strategies used by educators in various teaching contexts. A significant gap exists in the literature related to the strategy teachers use in the context of game-based vocabulary learning, particularly in early childhood education. As the primary facilitators of learning, teachers are responsible for designing, adapting, and delivering instruction that aligns with their classroom environment. However, many studies ignore the voices and experiences of teachers, especially in the context of kindergarten. Questions about teachers' perceptions of using games, how they modify games to suit specific learning needs, and what supports or limitations they encounter remain underexplored.

This gap is particularly evident in the Indonesian context, where limited research has examined kindergarten teachers' specific strategies in urban areas such as Semarang when implementing game-based vocabulary instruction. In addition, game-based vocabulary teaching for kindergarten was also associated with various challenges (Bakhsh, 2016; Deni & Fahriany, 2020). Teachers may face structural barriers such as a lack of time, inadequate resources, limited training, rigid curricula, and large class sizes. In many cases, administrative pressures to meet academic criteria or standardised learning outcomes can hinder game-based approaches, which are often viewed as informal or less academically rigorous (Haerul et al., 2024). From a pedagogical perspective, teachers may also struggle to manage the classroom during game-based activities. They may find it challenging to ensure that the game remains focused on the learning objectives while managing children's energy levels and maintaining their attention.

In addition, there is also the possibility that some teachers lack confidence or are less creative in designing engaging and educational classroom games, especially in contexts where professional development opportunities are scarce. Teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of game-based teaching play an important role in the success of game-based learning. A teacher who views games as an effective vocabulary learning tool and feels supported using them is more likely to adopt them meaningfully in their lessons. Conversely, if a teacher views games as challenging, time-

consuming, or inconsistent with learning goals, they may not use them in depth.

This study aims to explore game-based vocabulary teaching in kindergarten through a descriptive qualitative approach. Specifically, this study aims to describe what strategies teachers use in kindergarten vocabulary teaching, identify their challenges, and analyze their perceptions of game-based vocabulary teaching, including its effectiveness and impact on learning activities. This study does not review students' learning outcomes quantitatively. Still, it aims to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers' strategies and experiences in applying this method to provide contextual insights into the strategies of game-based vocabulary teaching in kindergarten.

METHODS

This study used a qualitative descriptive approach. The researcher chose this approach because the study aimed to describe in depth the strategies, perceptions, and challenges of teachers in game-based vocabulary teaching to kindergarten students. The participant was selected through purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique in which the researcher selects individuals who best fit the research objectives based on specific criteria. This selection was based on careful consideration that the participant had to have at least five years of experience teaching English in kindergarten, had practical experience designing and/or using game-based activities in their classrooms (e.g., flashcards, Simon Says, word-matching, etc.), and the ability to reflect on their teaching practices, especially on game-based vocabulary teaching. These criteria were designed to ensure that participants could provide in-depth insights into pedagogical strategies for game-based vocabulary teaching and the challenges in implementing it in kindergarten classrooms, as well as comprehensively articulate their perceptions of game-based vocabulary teaching.

The participant was an English teacher who had been teaching in early childhood education since 2011. This extensive experience enabled the participant to provide

detailed insights into practical teaching routines and the theoretical foundations of game-based vocabulary instruction for kindergarteners. The participant's deep understanding of the learning characteristics of young children and the context of kindergarten learning was a key consideration in the selection process.

The data collection techniques used in this study included document analysis of a lesson plan (RPPH) to identify the specific game-based strategies the teacher had applied, and a semi-structured interview to explore the teacher's experiences, including challenges faced during the implementation and their perceptions. The interview questions and the document analysis framework were developed based on the research objectives and findings from previous studies. Data collection began by contacting the participant to request permission to conduct the research and explain the purpose of the research. After obtaining consent from the participant, the researcher scheduled an interview via Zoom with the participant. The schedule was arranged according to the participants' availability and free time.

The interview was conducted via Zoom and lasted approximately 17 minutes. The researcher ensured that questions were asked to obtain relevant information per the research objectives. These questions are designed in such a way to gain in-depth insights into the aspects that are the focus of the research. All interview sessions in Zoom Meeting are recorded with the participant's consent. This process was done to ensure that all the information provided by the participant was recorded correctly and no important data was overlooked. The researcher also took additional notes during the interview to assist in data analysis.

The interview was then transcribed for further analysis. This stage required a structured effort. It started by carefully listening to the interview recording. The researcher used Microsoft Word software to record every detail of the interview data. Since the interview was conducted in Indonesian, the recorded transcript was translated into English to make it easier for readers to read and understand. The translation process was not merely a matter of converting Indonesian words into English, but also ensured that the original meaning

conveyed by the participants was preserved to avoid misunderstandings of the information provided.

The collected data was analyzed by thoroughly reading the transcript to understand the interview content. After completing the transcript and translation, the data were interpreted according to the research objectives. The collected data was analyzed to identify relevant patterns or findings. The results of this analysis were then used to draw conclusions and make recommendations in the research report.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Strategies used by the teacher in game-based vocabulary teaching

Based on the analysis of the lesson plan document, it was found that the learning approach of game-based English vocabulary learning had been systematically applied in learning activities. The lesson was designed with a relevant theme, "My School," where students were introduced to vocabulary objects they often encountered in the school environment, such as a bag, pencil, chair, etc. The learning objectives also explicitly mentioned that the teacher designed learning activities where students were expected to be able to mention these objects in English.

The games served as entertainment activities, facilitated vocabulary introduction, and built active interaction between teachers and students, creating a fun and non-boring learning atmosphere.

The teacher inserted various types of games that involved motoric activities and active participation from the students through learning activities using the game "Let's Have Fun," which combined visual media such as pictures, flashcards, and other props such as dolls, balls, and hula hoops. The teacher gave instructions by actively involving students, for example, through the question, "Can we find this at school?" while showing an object found in the school environment, or asking the students to point to a particular object while saying its name in English. Auditory media were also used in the lesson, such as "Hello Song" and a video titled "My School" to build a fun atmosphere, support vocabulary retention, and

strengthen students' vocabulary memory.

From the interview results regarding the strategy, the teacher explained that using games and visual-auditory media was chosen because it improved students' mood and made the learning process more fun.

"I usually used games, flashcards, and objects in the classroom. I also used songs to keep the children fun and not bored."

This statement showed the teacher's awareness of the characteristics of early childhood learning that required concrete experiences and varied stimulation.

The teacher also explained that the language of instruction used in the classroom was a mixture of English and their mother tongue, Bahasa Indonesia. This aimed to make it easier for children to understand commands and the context of learning activities.

This strategy reflected a pedagogical approach that was flexible and responsive to children's language abilities, without leaving the English language learning target as the main focus. In addition, the teacher also applied repetition strategies as part of game-based vocabulary teaching. In the lesson plan documents that had been analyzed, it was found that the teacher explicitly designed repetition activities to strengthen students' memory of the vocabulary introduced. There was an activity where the teacher mentioned the names of objects in the classroom using English, then asked students to imitate or repeat them verbally. This activity was done several times in one meeting as a form of memory reinforcement. This strategy reflected the teacher's awareness of the importance of repetition in supporting early childhood long-term memory. Repetition not only helped students remember words but also strengthened their pronunciation and increased their confidence in using a foreign language.

The repetition strategy applied by the teacher was not only part of the classroom routine but also a relevant pedagogical approach appropriate to the stages of children's language development. It strengthened the effectiveness of the game-based learning that the teacher used, making the learning process more meaningful and sustainable.

Moreover, the teacher provided a review session at the end of the lesson, which was part of the closing of the teaching and learning activity. In this session, children were invited to recall the words taught and learned, such as oral questions and light discussions. This showed that teachers focused on fun activities and considered the evaluative aspects of learning.

Thus, the application of repetition and reflection strategies in vocabulary learning showed that teachers were aware of balancing cognitive and affective aspects in the learning process of kindergarten children.

Another important strategy applied by teachers in game-based vocabulary learning was to carefully consider the level of difficulty of the games used to match the characteristics and abilities of early childhood.

"The difficulty level of the games had to be different. We had to be more patient for Early Childhood Education to keep them in the mood. The simplest game was, for example, learning colors. At school, there was a donut ring. The donut ring was very colorful, which we could use to learn colors. The ones that were close to them for pre-school children."

Through this statement, teachers realized that to deal with pre-school children, they had to be more patient and flexible, considering that their moods tended to change quickly and they were prone to boredom. Therefore, teachers chose games that were lighter and simpler but effective in achieving learning objectives.

In the interview, the teacher gave an example of using objects or game tools already available in the classroom, such as colored donut rings, as a medium to teach color vocabulary in English.

This selection was not without reason. The color donut ring was a very real object close to students' daily lives, so its use created a more relevant and meaningful learning context for them.

This strategy not only focused on cognitive aspects but also considered the psychological aspects of students. Teachers tried to keep the play activities fun, not to make students feel pressured, but still directed toward achieving language learning goals.

The selection of contextual and familiar games also helped to increase students' engagement during the learning process, as they felt the activity was close to their world. In this context, meaningful yet straightforward games effectively introduced English vocabulary in a natural and fun way.

Teachers' perception of game-based vocabulary teaching

The teacher had a positive perspective on using games to teach kindergarten children English vocabulary.

"For me, it's really effective. For me, because I also use it. Because again, children can't learn if we only use an explanation, without us practicing something, without us building their mood well by just learning, if we just sit and learn, it must be boring for them, they don't understand, they must be bored, sleepy, well so what we want to convey automatically usually doesn't enter anyway, so for me (games) are effective and important."

Through this statement, it could be concluded that she thought game-based teaching was very effective and important to implement, especially because games were suited to the characteristics of early childhood, who tended to be active, easily bored, and had a short attention span. The teacher emphasized that learning could not rely only on verbal instructions or lengthy explanations. The results were counterproductive if the method used was too monotonous, such as only telling children to sit and listen. Children would quickly lose focus, feel bored, and sleepy, so the learning material could not be adequately absorbed. In this context, games were a solution to build a fun and interactive learning atmosphere.

Furthermore, the teacher stated that using games allowed for hands-on practice or concrete experiences that were much easier for children to understand than just theoretical explanations. In other words, learning through games builds cognitive understanding and supports affective aspects such as motivation, enthusiasm, and joy in learning. The teacher believed that a fun learning atmosphere was the main key to learning messages being better received by children. Therefore, teachers consistently applied games in their daily learning activities and believed that this approach

was effective, very relevant, and needed in learning.

"So, for example, if we speak English 4 days a week, maybe we can use 1 day (for a game), the next day we change flashcards, the next day we use other games, and we change the games."

With this statement, the teacher viewed that variety in games was very important in learning English vocabulary for early childhood. In practice, the teacher relied on one type of game and consciously varied the game daily so that children did not feel bored. The teacher explained that the games used always differed in one week of English learning, lasting four days. For example, on the first day, media such as flashcards were used, then on the next day the game was replaced with another type, and so on. This was done because teachers realized that a routine that was too monotonous could make children lose interest in learning. By providing a variety of games, the teacher hoped to maintain children's enthusiasm in every learning session.

In addition, this teacher's perception showed that the teacher understood the importance of maintaining children's learning motivation through dynamic and creative approaches. Early childhood education children were curious but easily lost attention if the activities were too repetitive or uninteresting. Therefore, the teacher felt that changing the type of game periodically was one strategy that was fun and effective in helping children understand and remember new vocabulary in English. Teachers' flexibility in choosing and adjusting games reflected a pedagogical approach responsive to early learners' needs and characteristics.

"For me, games can make it easier for them to understand the lessons or themes given during the week. Besides games, we also have to review the worksheets; although they are not complex, they are still simple."

This statement showed that teachers saw games in learning as important in helping children understand the material or theme taught in one week. In the interview, the teacher stated that games made learning more fun and made it easier for children to grasp the lesson's content. This was especially important in early childhood education, where concrete and interactive approaches to learning were much

more effective than verbal explanations alone. Children at kindergarten age had short attention spans. They needed visual stimulation and physical activities involving movement and hands-on interaction to engage in learning actively.

Furthermore, the teacher also emphasized that in addition to the game itself, they could combine it with light evaluation, one of which was through worksheets. Although the worksheets used were not complex, teachers still considered them important to strengthen children's understanding of the material conveyed through the game. Worksheets designed according to the child's ability could be an effective reflection tool and provide information to the teacher about the extent to which the child understood the vocabulary that had been taught. This strategy reflected an integrated learning approach, where the game served as a medium for initial exploration and the worksheets were used as part of a simple reinforcement and evaluation process.

This teacher's perception showed an awareness of the importance of the balance between play and learning. Games provided a meaningful and fun learning experience, while lightweight worksheets ensured a measurable trace of children's understanding. Combining the two reflected adaptive pedagogical practices is appropriate to early childhood's developmental characteristics. The teacher realized that a crucial aspect that affected the enthusiasm and effectiveness of learning was students' emotional condition and mood.

"Because with their good mood, they will automatically be more enthusiastic about learning."

With this statement, teachers emphasized that when children were in a good mood, they would automatically show higher enthusiasm for learning. This showed that the teacher understood the importance of emotional readiness as a prerequisite before the cognitive process could run optimally. Children at the PAUD level did not yet have mature emotion regulation skills, so teachers played an important role in building a fun, safe, and emotionally positive learning atmosphere. Teachers used to keep children in a good mood through fun activities such as playing, singing, and moving

together.

A game-based learning approach was an effective tool in building this positive mood. Children who felt happy were more open to receiving new information and were active in learning activities. Teachers also revealed that if learning were done only with the lecture method or sitting still for a long time, children would quickly feel bored, tired, and sleepy. In contrast, with games, children felt like they were playing while learning without pressure. This was in line with the findings from Tang (2023), which showed that game-based learning could create a more interesting learning environment and significantly increase student engagement.

By creating a positive mood through play, teachers increased children's motivation to learn and helped them develop a positive relationship with learning. This was an important foundation for long-term, meaningful, and enjoyable learning during the golden years of their development.

Challenges faced by the teacher

Although using games to teach English vocabulary for early childhood provided many benefits, teachers also realized that this approach came with challenges.

"Sometimes, if the children have enjoyed playing the games too much, asking them to refocus is difficult. That's the only difficult thing: restoring their concentration."

Through this statement, one of the challenges and drawbacks of game-based vocabulary teaching was the difficulty in regulating children's focus and concentration after enjoying the game too much. The teacher said that when the children had enjoyed themselves too much while playing, they tended to find it challenging to be redirected back to more serious or structured learning activities. This was a challenge in classroom learning because teachers needed to carefully manage the rhythm and transition of activities, so as not to lose control of the classroom atmosphere.

This phenomenon was in line with the characteristics of early childhood, when children still had a short attention span and were easily distracted. When they were too immersed in a fun game, a change of activity could cause resistance.

Therefore, teachers had to have strong and creative classroom management strategies, such as making smooth activity transitions, using specific visual or musical cues to mark activity changes, or even inserting play elements in more academic activities so that children did not feel there was too drastic a difference.

It showed that although a play-based approach could increase children's learning motivation, it required reasonable control from the teacher so that the play process did not interfere with the main learning flow. In addition, teachers were also required to organize play activities with clear duration, rules, and goals, so that children did not just play without direction but stayed on the learning path.

In other words, play effectively attracted children's attention and built a fun classroom atmosphere. Still, if it were poorly organized, it could cause distraction and make it difficult for students to return to the core material. Teachers had to be sensitive to classroom dynamics and be ready with alternative strategies to keep learning effective despite using fun methods.

This showed the importance of the teacher's role not only as a facilitator but also as a manager of a balanced learning atmosphere between playing and learning.

This was reinforced by the teacher's statement, who revealed that students' focus and attention during the learning process was their challenge in implementing games in the classroom.

"The focus of the children. Sometimes they focus more on the game. They focus more on the games. So we inevitably have to repeat the material we want to convey again."

This statement showed that children were often more focused on the game than the material conveyed. In other words, they were more interested in the fun and activities in the game rather than understanding and absorbing the vocabulary or concepts being taught. This was undoubtedly an important concern for teachers because the activity's primary purpose was to support the mastery of learning materials, not merely for entertainment.

Because of this condition, the teacher had to repeat the material. Repetition was a mandatory strategy so the learning

message could still be received even though the child's attention had been distracted. For example, when children were too busy playing and did not catch the instructions or vocabulary being introduced, the teacher would repeat it through questions and answers, showing pictures or objects, or oral repetition collectively. This process required the teacher's patience and creativity in keeping the repetition from becoming boring, while maintaining a fun learning atmosphere.

In the context of early childhood education, where children's concentration levels were relatively short and easily distracted, the teacher's role in facilitating and monitoring the learning process was crucial. Teachers needed to ensure that every game element remained relevant to the learning objectives. They managed the duration and intensity of the game so that it did not distract children from delivering the core material.

Thus, although game-based learning was proven effective in increasing children's enthusiasm and participation, teachers still needed to use it wisely. The main focus should still have been on achieving learning competencies, not just on the fun of playing. This balanced approach between play and learning was the key to success in implementing game-based learning strategies in early childhood education.

Early childhood children tended to get lost in the euphoria of play, so their attention to the subject matter could drop dramatically. In this condition, teachers were required to have a backup strategy prepared in advance so that the learning process continued as planned.

"Usually, at one time, I have prepared one APE object that I have to use when the children enjoy the game too much and enjoy the games that I create. So inevitably, I have to be quick."

The teacher said she always prepared an additional educational game tool that could be used quickly as a backup plan if the main game started losing its direction or the children were too immersed in the play atmosphere. This strategy was a form of anticipation against students becoming too active in activities that could disrupt the learning flow.

This meant that the teacher acted as a facilitator and a classroom manager who had to be ready to make decisions

quickly.

Readiness to respond to this situation required teachers to have high creativity and sensitivity to children's behavior, because the diversion of activities had to remain fun and restore their focus. This was a challenge because young children had short attention spans and were easily distracted by interesting things around them. If the games were designed to be too fun without proper organization, it could make children lose control of the learning activities. As a result, teachers had to transition activities to keep the learning atmosphere conducive immediately.

This transition strategy was not only a change of game. Still, it could involve light physical activity, singing, or even diverting children's attention to other real objects relevant to the lesson theme. The use of games in learning requires flexible pedagogical strategies. Teachers could not rely on one method but needed reserves and activity variations to maintain student focus and engagement. When children started to get too absorbed in the atmosphere of play, quick and appropriate intervention from the teacher determined the effectiveness of learning.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to describe teachers' strategies, perceptions, and challenges in teaching English vocabulary through games in kindergarten. The findings showed that the teacher used various approaches, such as games, visual and auditory media, and repetition strategies to support children's vocabulary comprehension. The teacher considered games effective because they create a fun learning atmosphere and help children grasp the material more easily. However, some challenges also arise, such as a decrease in children's focus when they become too engrossed in the game and the need for teachers to quickly redirect students' attention to keep them focused on the learning objectives. These findings align with the initial goals of the study and provide a realistic picture of teaching practices in the classroom. This study also opens opportunities for further research to explore the concrete

impact of game-based strategies on children's vocabulary achievement in greater depth.

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