

## **Exploring the Use of Word Chain Game for Vocabulary Enrichment in English Language Classroom**

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### **ABSTRACT**

One of the greatest challenges of learning English as foreign language is learning new words. The issue is that many EFL students cannot memorize new words when they are introduced with the help of rote and repetition, which can decrease motivation and interest in the process. The given research project will investigate the application of the Word Chain game as a vocabulary learning strategy in classrooms of the Indonesian junior high school. In particular, it will also explore the process of implementing the game by a teacher, and the response of students to the use of this game in classroom activities. The design used in the study was a qualitative case study design, which conducted one English teacher and 30 seventh-grade students in a junior high school in Surabaya, which is a public school. Teacher interviews, student questionnaires and classroom documentation were used to gather data which was analyzed in a thematic manner. The results have shown that the Word Chain game encourages active involvement, advances vocabulary memory and motivates students. These findings add value to the body of game-based learning research since they demonstrate that even low-tech traditional games can be useful in the EFL classroom to develop more interactive and cooperative learning activities in vocabulary.

**Key words:** Word Chain; Vocabulary Learning; Game-based Learning

### **INTRODUCTION**

Vocabulary learning is a significant part of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching. In case a learner lacks sufficient vocabulary, he or she will not be able to learn how to follow directions, talk properly, and express him/herself with others. Vocabulary has been seen as a fundamental aspect of language proficiency since it has a direct relation to the knowledge that a learner has in understanding the language and using it in different communicative situations. Researchers and educators concur that other language skills including reading, listening, writing, and speaking cannot be developed well in the absence of vocabulary. Within the

framework of the first language (L1) learning process, the vocabulary is developed by default after an individual is repeatedly exposed to the language itself in his or her daily routines. Words are incidentally learnt by learners in their interactions and in context. Nevertheless, when it comes to a foreign language (EFL), there is far less access to the target language input by the learners, which leads to the lack of the opportunities to learn new vocabulary in a natural manner. Therefore, classroom-based vocabulary teaching is very important in enabling students to acquire sufficient linguistic competence and communicative competency.

Even though vocabulary teaching remains an important issue in most EFL classrooms, the use of traditional and passive vocabulary teaching strategies like rote memorization, word lists, or repetition worksheets continues to dominate the vocabulary instruction process. Although these practices are simple to use, they are more likely to encourage mechanical learning and lead to low vocabulary retention and student disengagement (Patra et al., 2022). The recent research in the Indonesian schools also demonstrates that monotonous and repetitive learning tasks may cause boredom and the loss of student motivation (Ferdiansah, Hartono, and Pranata, 2024). Most learners have problems remembering the new vocabulary due to forgetting it soon after teaching sessions, loss of interest in retrieving the vocabulary in the context of the sentence, and inability to understand the vocabulary when the learning process is not diversified and engaging. According to Schmitt (2010), repetition is necessary to memorize words, though it should be accompanied by various learning techniques that can help the words to stay in the memory rather than fade away immediately after introducing them. In the same vein, Alqahtani (2019) states that the process of vocabulary learning is more successful when surrounded by meaningful and contextual activities and not by memorizing the lists of words. These results prove that the teaching of vocabulary must be not only based on the explicit explanation but also interactive, fun, and ongoing. Thus, there is a need to replace these forms of instructions, methods that ensure repetitions to enhance memory yet at the same time allow the students to gain valuable and enjoyable learning experiences.

Following this necessity, a wide range of strategies have been implemented by EFL teachers to make teaching vocabulary more interesting and fruitful. These consist of communicational activities, group work, incorporation of digital technology, and application of classroom games. Among them, the use of classroom games is commonly held as a success in the encouragement of motivation, collaboration, and valuable education experiences (Yolagelsili & Arian, 2011). The incorporation of games into the language teaching process has resulted in the development of Game-Based Learning (GBL), a method of teaching that uses the elements of games to improve the process of learning. According to Lee and Hammer (2011), GBL uses the aspects of challenge, feedback and level of progression to develop a stimulating and interactive learning experience. In the context of EFL, games are not only associated with entertainment purposes but also with instructional ones that help to make students apply language skills, develop their vocabulary, and participate in communicative situations. As a result, GBL is an alternative between education and

entertainment, which allows students to learn a foreign language in a more interactive and entertaining form. Many researchers have discussed digital game-based learning, which is interesting but also has several drawbacks. Among them are Pratiwi and Lestari (2025) reveal that digital game-based learning (DGBL) promotes vocabulary acquisition among EFL students through the improvement of motivation, engagement, and retention. However, these digitally oriented studies give an opportunity to investigate the functionality of traditional non-digital games in the physical classroom. Another study by Azkiyah et al. also reported that audiovisual games like Kahoot! enhanced the level of engagement among students when learning vocabulary as used in secondary schools. It justifies using student-based gaming activities, but it is not obvious that word chain games can produce the same effect and attitude when introduced by teachers in real-life classrooms.

In this study, the Word Chain game is one of the most interesting and pedagogically rich exercises among many games used in vocabulary learning. In this game, students are expected to sustain a sequence of words based on the final letter of the precedent word. It is a basic and yet useful drill that helps the learners to remember the vocabulary, think fast and make semantic associations between the words. Paramartha (2018) notes that this kind of word game boosts memory, speeds up the recall of words, and enhances the associations of words, which is why it is an effective tool in the vocabulary strategy. Word Chain game would be especially applicable in the context of Kurikulum Merdeka (Kemendikbudristek, 2022) that focuses on student-centered, fun, and cooperative learning. The game is also affordable, available, and flexible in classrooms that have minimal technological capabilities. Thus, it has enormous opportunities to encourage active participation and peer collaboration, even in the schools with minimum facilities.

Nevertheless, although there is an increasing body of research that goes to testify the positive effect of games on the language learning process, there is not a lot of research that dwells on the Word Chain game. The current research has tended to cover the digital game platforms or simply game-based learning, and there are very few studies, which investigate non-digital games, especially Word Chain, in the real classroom setting. Earlier studies like Suci Dwina Darma (2024) showed that Word Chain has the potential to enhance vocabulary acquisition in students, although most of them were encompassed in the higher education setting or made use of a predominantly quantitative form of data. Consequently, there is yet to be achieved an empirical knowledge of the Word Chain game application to real classes of secondary school and how students react on this exercise during the vocabulary acquisition process. However, in a study conducted by Asfia et al. (2024) in a state junior high school in Palu, the Word Chain Game facilitated vocabulary (meaning, usage, and spelling) mastery. Nevertheless, the research problem centers more on quantitative vocabulary results and less on the practice of teachers and immediate student responses in the classroom.

To fill this gap, this paper examines the use of the Word Chain game in an English language classroom in a publicly-run junior high school in Surabaya, Indonesia.

This paper will attempt to give a descriptive discussion of how the teacher uses the game as a pedagogical instrument to teach vocabulary and how the students receive the application of the game in the learning process and how they feel about it. With the help of this investigation, the research will make a contribution to the further comprehension of how traditional, non-digital games can be incorporated into the EFL classroom to support the vocabulary acquisition in a simple, collaborative, and entertaining manner.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Some researchers investigated the possibility of using the Word Chain Game to enhance vocabulary acquisition. Muhammad, Manurung, and Wahyudin (2022) conducted a library research study that included both primary and secondary sources on the use of Word Chain Game in the EFL classrooms. Their findings revealed that despite the fact that the teaching processes differed among the studies, the game always helped the students to master vocabulary. It was revealed to assist students to remember and memorize words easier, cooperate and stimulate motivation to engage in the learning process. Their study was however restricted to a literature review and thus the findings were mostly conceptual, but not empirical in providing much of the insights as to how the game was actually applied in the real classroom setting.

Yanti (2017) examined how the Word Chain Game can be used to improve vocabulary learning among students in junior high schools. The study found that the game offered a good learning experience and helped more students to memorize new words. However, the research was based on a limited-scale classroom application, and it did not comment upon the possible impacts of the variables like student engagement, group interaction, or teacher facilitation, on the learning outcomes.

Ramadani, Naro, and Nur (2020) also addressed the topic of the influence of the Word Chain Game on vocabulary development in the eighth-grade students of the MTs Barana Jeneponto. Their findings showed that the game was effective in raising vocabulary awareness of students and helped them in learning. The research, however, similar to the majority of works on this subject, should have used an experimental design that would have concentrated on the pre- and post-test difference in scores. As much as such designs give quantifiable data on vocabulary enhancement, they usually ignore qualitative factors like classroom dynamics, teacher attitudes, and student attitudes in the implementation process.

In addition to the given findings, Sulistiawati (2020) has also found that the Word Chain Game encouraged students to become more active in classroom activities and led to the enrichment of the vocabulary due to the pleasant repetition. However, her work was also quantitative with the focus on the statistical results rather than description of classroom observations. Thus, her findings tell about the motivational advantages of the game, but do not show how the game can be used

as a part of the pedagogical instrument in terms of developing vocabulary learning processes.

A more recent study by Putri, Asari, and Paulina (2024) investigated the influence of the Word Chain Game on a fifth-grade group of students at the SDN 88 Gresik through the pre-experimental design. They found that the vocabulary mastery of the students significantly improved with the introduction of the game with the average scores rising to 90.06 as opposed to the average score of 63.87. Another result of the study was that the game created a fun and cooperative classroom environment, lowered levels of anxiety, and promoted active engagement. Although the study has good quantitative evidence, it was carried out in elementary level and therefore may not be an accurate depiction of the cognitive and social traits of learners in secondary schools.

Continuing the discussion of Word Chain, Hidayatullah et al. (2023) explored the topic of vocabulary acquisition in young EFL learners by using both modern (digital) and traditional games in interactive classrooms. Their qualitative and mixed methodology showed that interactive games were very helpful in retention and engagement, but the context of peer interaction and mediation of a teacher had a great impact on the success of the game. However, the research did not separate a particular type of game such as Word Chain, and the contribution of games in question remains unanswered. In line with that, Nurfadilah, Safar, and Affandi (2025) reviewed gamized-based learning strategies in learning EFL vocabulary with a focus on motivation and retention factors. They state that games have a potential to form memorable learning experiences and encourage long-term vocabulary growth, however, they point to the fact that most of the studies concentrate on digital platforms and short-term interventions. This brings out the necessity of more long term classroom research and game studies not necessarily online. Additionally, Mahendra et al. (2024) investigated the application of Scrabble game to a marginalised student group in Malaysia and discovered that vocabulary learning was massive. Their analysis demonstrates the promise of non-digital, low-cost games, particularly when resources are limited. But there was also a concentration on test results as opposed to what was happening in the classroom practice of teachers and what students thought in a live interaction classroom setting.

Angraeni, Chuzaimah, and Nasir (2023) researched the perception that EFL students have towards learning vocabulary by playing on-line games. Their experiment among Indonesian university students showed that online games could enhance substantially the vocabulary input exposure of the students who were studied and help them get incidental learning by the use of context and repetition. The results also highlighted motivation and engagement as some of the main mediating variables in the achievement of vocabulary acquisition by means of games. Nevertheless, even though the study emphasizes the beneficial role digital games play in vocabulary acquisition, it is mainly based on self-reported data and does not cover the way non-digital and traditional games, including the Word Chain

Game, work in classroom based learning. This implies that there is a necessity of extending the investigation of the digital game environment to face-to-face classroom activities that would enable increased social and cooperative interaction.

Together, these studies have been able to determine that Word Chain Game and other game-based learning may easily be used to improve vocabulary mastery and to make learning an attractive experience. Nevertheless, a keen observation shows that there are a number of gaps. First, the vast majority of research that has been conducted before has utilized experimental or quantitative designs, mainly counting the improvement in terms of test scores. Even though the validity of the game is proven through such studies in numerical terms, the research does not consist of the qualitative aspects of the implementation of the activity by teachers, student interaction during the game, and challenges that arise in real classroom settings. Second, the literature is mostly narrow and deals with elementary or low-resource classes and there is little investigation of secondary classes where students vary in language competence and motivation. Third, the empirical research on the application of Word Chain Game in particular to EFL classrooms at the secondary level remains limited, and its use in the context of secondary classrooms in regards to the process of implementation, strategies of the teacher, and the reaction of the students is under-researched instead of outcome indicators. As a result, there is an evident gap in qualitative classroom-based studies that examines the way that teachers use the Word Chain Game and how students encounter it in a real learning context. To overcome these weaknesses, the current paper will fill this research gap by investigating the classroom application of the Word Chain Game in a junior high school setting and exploring both the teacher behaviors and the student reactions to the application of the Word Chain Game as a vocabulary enrichment strategy.

## **METHOD**

### **Design and Sample**

This study employed a qualitative research design with a case study approach, as it aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of how the Word Chain game was implemented in vocabulary teaching. The case study approach allowed the researcher to explore the teaching process, student engagement, and contextual factors in a real classroom setting. The study was conducted at a public junior high school in Surabaya, Indonesia. The participants consisted of one English teacher and 30 seventh-grade students. The teacher was purposefully selected due to her experience in integrating games into English language instruction and her willingness to participate in the research. The class was chosen because it represented an average-level group in terms of English proficiency, which made it suitable for examining the impact of game-based vocabulary learning in a typical Indonesian classroom context.

### **Instrument and Procedure**

Three main data collection instruments were employed: teacher interviews, classroom observations, and a student learning style questionnaire. The semi-structured teacher interview was designed to gather detailed information about the implementation of the Word Chain game, including its perceived benefits, challenges, and pedagogical relevance. The interview questions encouraged reflection on instructional strategies, student responses, and the teacher's evaluation of the game's effectiveness in enhancing vocabulary learning. Classroom observations were conducted during lessons that incorporated the Word Chain game to document student engagement, participation, and vocabulary use. Observation field notes were taken systematically to record classroom interactions, student enthusiasm, and the contextual use of new vocabulary items during the game activities.

In addition, a student learning style questionnaire was distributed to identify students' preferred modes of learning. The questionnaire was not intended to evaluate the effectiveness of the Word Chain game itself, but to provide background information on learners' preferences, which could influence their perceptions of the activity. Supplementary data were also collected from classroom documents, including lesson plans and samples of student written work, to support and triangulate the findings. The data collection procedure consisted of three stages. First, permission was obtained from the school administration and the participating teacher. Second, classroom observations and teacher interviews were conducted immediately after the lessons where the Word Chain game was applied. Third, student questionnaires were distributed and collected directly after the session to ensure accurate and immediate responses.

### **Data Analysis**

All collected data, including interview transcripts, observation notes, questionnaires, and classroom documents, were organized and analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis followed the qualitative data analysis framework proposed by Miles and Huberman, which involves three key stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. During data reduction, the researcher transcribed and coded all data to identify emerging patterns and categories related to the use of the Word Chain game. The data were then displayed in descriptive summaries and thematic charts to facilitate interpretation. Finally, conclusions were drawn by comparing data from different sources teacher interviews, classroom observations, and student questionnaires to ensure validity through triangulation. This analytical process enabled the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of how the Word Chain game supported vocabulary learning, the challenges faced during implementation, and the students' responses to game-based learning in an authentic classroom environment.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this study, it was found that the Word Chain game was introduced at the end of each vocabulary lesson as a form of reinforcement exercise at the end of the lesson. The teacher said that he deliberately gave the game at the end of the lesson to review and reinforce the vocabulary from the material that had just been taught to the students. The reason for this was that the game would be played at the end of the main learning activity, as this would enable students to better remember and use the new words at the end of the lesson, as well as creating a fun and engaging environment at the end of the lesson. This practice was performed in small groups of four to five students. The teacher noted that group work was better than individual play which would motivate all the students, including those who remained quiet or were unwilling to respond during the normal lessons. Collaboration and peer support also emerged due to working in groups because students who worked well could assist their peers in recalling or spelling words correctly. In the process of implementation, both groups would switch turns reading English words in which the initial letter of every new word was to sound identical to the final letter of the last word. The teacher observed each round, registered the mistakes and awarded the points to the fastest and most correct groups. The Word Chain activity usually lasted between 10-15 minutes at the conclusion of every lesson. According to the teacher, this period was adequate to keep the students enthusiastic without interfering with the core learning goals of the lesson.

Based on the observations, the majority of the participants had positive reactions to the activity. Among 30 students, 26 stated that they were more eager and motivated to learn the vocabulary playing Word Chain. One student said that he or she is more enthusiastic to study something new as it is a challenge. One of them added, it is simpler to memorize words when I play with my friends. Interestingly, those students who were generally inactive in the regular lessons were more active during the game. This observation was indeed verified by the teacher who noted, "Some of my quiet students eventually participated in the activity because they were interested in winning with their group. Nevertheless, other students also reported the problem of the inability to memorize words rapidly. To overcome this obstacle the teacher enabled group discussions which did not only assist weaker students, but encouraged cooperation between peers.

The results of the research indicate that the Word Chain game may be a very useful means of vocabulary enrichment in the EFL classroom. This practice carried out by the teacher proves that it is possible to successfully adapt non-digital word games to a formal learning environment. This aligns with Suci Dwina Darma (2024), who discovered that the vocabulary mastery of the Word Chain Game was better, and it facilitated active engagement among the students at STIKES Al-Fatah Bengkulu. Additionally, the enhanced motivation and fun as reported by students in this study is consistent with the findings on Totti et al. (2024) who found that the "Finding Word Game" had a significant effect on the engagement and vocabulary scores of learners in SMP Santa Monika.



Moreover, the reactions and enthusiasm that students showed after they played the Word Chain Game positively point to the fact that the Word Chain Game could contribute to higher motivation and interest in vocabulary learning. The fact that students enjoyed the activity helped them be more concentrated and unhappy about errors. This is in line with the results of Anjarwani et al. (2025) who found out that interactive games were a considerable means of student involvement and comprehension of vocabulary during the Indonesian language classes. Even though they studied in an elementary school, and it was on the Bahasa Indonesian language, the principle does not go away, play learning encourages motivation, concentration and vocabulary retention. These comparisons affirm the fact that games involving words, both online and offline, would effectively stimulate the active involvement of learners in different learning settings.

As such, other studies on the same topic such as the study by Tambunan and Rahman (2023) in using Bingo games in EFL vocabulary classes among junior high school students in Indonesia also indicated an apparent rise in student motivation and attendance. Their case study found out that when they introduce vocabulary activities in a competition but fun way, students achieve better levels of attention and increased periods of engagement throughout the lessons. These findings do not contradict the current research, as the Word Chain Game changed what would otherwise have been a dull vocabulary practice into a lively and engaging experience. The two studies point out the importance of classroom games in facilitating student-based learning, interactive, creative, and memorable learning.

In addition, Ariani, Marhum, Dewi, and Anggreni (2023) discovered that the application of Hidden Object games played a significant role in enhancing vocabulary acquisition among EFL learners in junior high schools of Central Sulawesi. Their results emphasized the importance of visual and interactive activities that could allow the learners to relate the new words to the contextual hints and this resulted in the deeper retention of the words. Even though the Word Chain Game does not use visual stimulation but the verbal one, both studies have a common point that engagement and interaction are the main elements of effective vocabulary acquisition. Such similarities point to the fact that different types of games, either visual or verbal, can be effective pedagogical tools to reinforce the vocabulary learning and memory of students in the context of EFL environments in Indonesia.

This study also has numerous practical implications on teachers. The Word Chain game may be employed as a reinforcement technique at the end of the vocabulary learning process since it has been shown to induce motivation among students and even to attract students who tend to be passive to participate. Therefore, this simple game can be employed by teachers as an alternative type of learning to make the classroom atmosphere more vibrant. Nevertheless, the research has shortcomings, including the small sample size (only 30 students), the setting of the research (only in a single lesson), and the undiversified nature of the game, so the findings cannot be extrapolated. Thus, it is proposed that additional studies be conducted to attract

more participants of different schools, compare the efficiency of Word Chain with other vocabulary-based games and review the long-term effects of the game on vocabulary memory of the students in order to make the results which are obtained more comprehensive.

Furthermore, the results of the present study also indicate that the Word Chain game does not only provide an effect on motivation and involvement among students, but it can also contribute to the improved memory of vocabulary. The chain-word activity enables the students to relate to each other a word in a more organized manner. This process helps them to memorise new words easily because of the word associations that arise in the course of the game. Word Chain may, therefore, be regarded as a motivational game, and as a cognitive strategy that facilitates memory reinforcement when learning vocabulary.

In terms of retention, the Word Chain game helped students remember new words more easily by connecting them in sequence. Similar results were reported by Fauzani (2024), who showed that word games during online learning could effectively support vocabulary recall. Challenges such as time pressure when recalling words were also noted. However, the teacher's adaptation of allowing group discussions proved effective in overcoming these difficulties, reflecting the importance of peer support in vocabulary learning. This is in line with Hidayatullah et al. (2024), who found that cooperative strategies in traditional and contemporary games helped students reduce anxiety and improve recall. But it must be kept in mind, not everybody reacts to the Word Chain game the same. Given that individuals are different in ways like learning styles, level of confidence, and cognitive strategies that students use, this can influence the outcome. To illustrate the point, students who have the social learning styles would find it easier to adapt since they would like to work as a team and socialize with peers. On the other hand, individualistic or high anxiety students might also struggle to be engaged, particularly when there is time pressure to recall vocabulary. This demonstrates that the effectiveness of the game also depends on the features of every individual student, and therefore, teachers must be keen when dealing with activities to ensure that all people will gain equally. Altogether, the findings of the present research show that the Word Chain game is not only effective in terms of vocabulary development among students but it also motivates them, fosters collaboration and inclusivity in learning. Though the study has only been conducted in a single school, the results confirm that the simplest traditional games still may have a significant role in aiding the vocabulary learning process in modern classes.

## CONCLUSION

This study has discussed the application of the Word Chain Game as a vocabulary expansion pedagogical activity in an Indonesian EFL classroom. Regarding the first research question, it was found that the teacher used the Word Chain Game as a post-vocabulary lesson reinforcement at the end of the lesson. The task was done in

small groups, which allowed the students to engage in the work together when rereading the new words that they had learned. This arrangement gave the option of repetition and interaction with peers—two crucial factors to vocabulary consolidation. The 10-15 minutes of time at the conclusion of the lesson was planned in order to keep excitement high without exhaustion, and this was mostly applicable in the afternoon lessons. When answering the second research question, the results revealed that the reaction of students to the Word Chain Game was positive. Majority of the respondents claimed that the game was more enjoyable, motivating and easier to remember. The competitive and cooperative environment is what motivated the students who were once passive to become active. Besides, repetition coupled with interaction and social support enabled students to remember and retain vocabulary better. These reactions point out that low cost, traditional games can be effective to boost motivation and involvement in language learning settings.

On the whole, the study gives some contribution to the increasing literature that classroom games, in particular, non-digital, word-based games, can be effective vocabulary learning strategies in EFL classrooms. Findings also highlight the need to incorporate interactive and fun activities to supplement explicit instruction, in particular, in the schools with little access to digital resources. This is possible by placing the game towards the end of the lesson and carrying it out as a group, which would help teachers provide a classroom environment that facilitates both learning vocabulary cognitively and affectively. To conduct the research in the future, it is proposed to encompass more students representing various schools in order to compare the results. The duration of the memory of the words by the students playing the game was also observable to researchers. Also, it is possible to test other forms of games, both digital and traditional, to determine which ones will be the most helpful in enhancing vocabulary acquisition during the English lessons.

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