

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This chapter contains several sections: research background, research questions, research purposes, research significance, research scope, conceptual framework, and previous studies.

A. Research Background

Vocabulary acquisition is a fundamental component of second language (L2) learning, particularly for young learners. According to Nation (2001), learners must first become proficient in over 2.000 high-frequency word groups, which cover about 95% of the words found in general texts. Once this core vocabulary is acquired, learners need support with practical strategies to expand their lexical knowledge. This highlights the importance of engaging, context-based learning approaches to improve meaningful vocabulary retention. Vocabulary is considered one of the most essential aspects of language teaching, as it forms the basis for the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Without adequate vocabulary knowledge, learners find it challenging to understand input and express themselves effectively (Zarfsaz & Yeganehpour, 2021). Wilkins (1972) famously states, "... without grammar, very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed," underscoring the indispensable role of vocabulary in communication. This is especially true for young learners, whose early exposure to vocabulary shapes their ability to engage meaningfully and confidently with language.

In addition to vocabulary acquisition, vocabulary retention is equally important in language learning. Vocabulary retention refers to learners' ability to recall and use newly learned words over time (Nation, 2001). It is not enough for students to recognize words during a lesson; they must also be able to remember and apply them in different contexts after instruction. However, learners often forget new vocabulary if it is not reinforced through repeated exposure and meaningful use. Therefore, effective vocabulary instruction should focus not only on introducing new words but also on ensuring long-term retention (Schmitt, 2010).

Despite its significant role in foreign language learning, EFL learners frequently struggle to remember new English words and often forget vocabulary after the lesson. They are also often less motivated to learn English. Students may remember new words during or shortly after a lesson but have difficulty recalling them after a longer period. Students also recognize a previously learned word when it is presented in a familiar activity but have difficulty recalling it independently. This also happens at the school where the research is carried out. Based on the preliminary interview with the teacher in one of the public elementary schools in Bandung, the teaching activities are commonly conducted through explanation and repetition, which sometimes makes students less actively engaged during the learning process. These conditions indicate that more engaging and interactive learning strategies are needed to support student motivation and vocabulary retention.

One learning approach that has the potential to overcome this problem is the use of gamification. The use of gamification in English Language Teaching (ELT) has opened up new opportunities for creating engaging and interactive learning experiences, as its benefits, including higher motivation, improved language acquisition, opportunities for collaborative learning, and instant feedback, highlight its potential to transform the language learning process (Wulantari et al., 2023). Effective game design can provide valuable insights into effective learning, while modern learning theories can also contribute to the development of more effective and meaningful games (Gee, 2008). The use of gamification may support students' engagement and help improve vocabulary retention among young learners.

Games, which are often incorporated into learning activities, enhance cognitive flexibility, promote hands-on learning, and, most importantly, make the learning process more enjoyable (Kavak, 2022). Gamification is the application of game elements and mechanics in non-game contexts, such as education, to enhance engagement, motivation, and learning outcomes (Deterding, 2012). In language learning, gamification enriches traditional classroom activities by making them more interactive, enjoyable, competitive, and goal-oriented, while encouraging active participation through elements such as achievements, competition, and

progress tracking (Wulantari et al., 2023). Therefore, gamification can be considered an effective approach to fostering a more engaging and meaningful language learning experience.

Several studies have explored vocabulary retention through gamified and interactive learning approaches. Namaziandost & Çakmak (2025) investigated the use of AI-generated storytelling and gamified learning found that both approaches improved learners' vocabulary retention and engagement, with AI-generated storytelling producing the highest learning outcomes. Similarly, Aco & Suwandi (2025) reported that gamified learning significantly enhanced students' vocabulary retention and learning motivation compared with conventional instruction. In addition, Mohamed (2021) examined the effectiveness of educational games among elementary school students and revealed that game-based activities improved vocabulary acquisition and retention while creating a more enjoyable and motivating learning environment. Although these studies consistently demonstrate the positive effects of gamified learning on vocabulary retention, most have focused on experimental designs that primarily measure learning outcomes and compare instructional methods. Relatively few studies have explored young learners' experiences during gamified vocabulary learning while simultaneously examining vocabulary retention within a qualitative classroom context.

Thus, there remains a gap in research on young learners' experiences of simple, non-digital gamified activities and vocabulary retention among EYL students, especially in local education contexts such as Indonesia. In many primary schools in Indonesia, limited access to technology and large class sizes make it difficult to implement advanced digital tools. Therefore, the current study aims to explore young learners' learning experiences in participating in gamified activities and to investigate how vocabulary retention is reflected among fourth-grade students at one of the public primary schools in Bandung. The study specifically focuses on structural gamification, in which game-like elements are incorporated into regular vocabulary learning activities without changing the instructional content or learning objectives. The activities include matching cards, sentence-building, jumbled-sentence rotation, picture guessing, and peer interaction. These

activities were implemented using accessible classroom materials rather than digital applications or advanced technology.

B. Research Questions

Based on the explanation provided in the background, the researcher formulates the research questions as follows:

1. What are students' learning experiences when using gamified activities in learning new vocabulary?
2. How is the vocabulary retention among young learners after participating in gamified activities over a period of tentative?

C. Research Purposes

Based on the above problem statement, the purposes of this study are as follows:

1. To find out students' learning experiences when using gamified activities in learning new vocabulary.
2. To examine the vocabulary retention among young learners after participating in gamified activities over a period of tentative.

D. Research Significances

The significance of this research is categorized into two aspects: practical and theoretical.

1. Theoretical Significance

Theoretically, the current study contributes to research in English Language Teaching (ELT), particularly in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL), vocabulary learning, and gamification in language learning. The current study enriches the literature by providing insight into how gamification strategies affect vocabulary retention among EYL learners and into the relationship between enjoyable learning experiences and language acquisition outcomes. In addition, the current study is expected to reinforce student-centered learning theory and implicit learning that emphasize active engagement, meaningful interaction, and learning experiences in the language-learning process.

2. Practical Significance

The current study provides practical contributions to English language teaching at the primary school level. By implementing gamification activities, teachers can discover more engaging and enjoyable strategies to increase students' involvement in the learning process. The findings of this research can serve as a reference for teachers in designing classroom activities that focus not only on vocabulary mastery but also on positive, meaningful learning experiences. In addition, future researchers may use this study as a foundation to explore different types of games, learning strategies, or research methods to develop more effective approaches to vocabulary learning.

E. Research Scope

The scope of the current study is limited to exploring the learning experiences of young learners and vocabulary retention through gamification in English language learning at one of the public primary schools in Bandung. The participants of the current study are fourth-grade primary school students. The current study focuses on the implementation of gamification in the classroom to support learning experiences and vocabulary learning; it does not aim to compare teaching methods or measure students' overall English proficiency. Vocabulary retention was assessed in the current study based on students' learning experiences and learning outcomes over a period of tentative. the scores obtained from the vocabulary tests were analyzed descriptively to identify patterns of vocabulary retention, changes in students' performance, and individual differences across the testing periods. Therefore, the numerical scores functioned as descriptive supporting evidence within the qualitative case study rather than as an independent quantitative component, allowing the study to describe vocabulary retention over time within this specific classroom context.

F. Conceptual Framework

Learning experience is the subjective experience of learners during the learning process, encompassing perceptions and responses when interacting with various elements of learning, such as materials, instructors, technology, and assignments (Silva et al., 2025). Young learners have unique cognitive, social, and

emotional characteristics that influence how they learn a second language. According to Cameron (2001), children aged 6-12 learn better through concrete experiences, visual input, active participation, and playful interaction. The learning process of children is closely related to curiosity, imagination, and movement, making them more responsive to tasks that are fun, meaningful, and activity-based. From a developmental perspective, Piaget's theory explains that children find it easier to understand concepts when learning is supported by hands-on, game-like activities (Piaget & Inhelder, 2008). Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes that young learners are greatly helped by social interaction, scaffolding, and collaborative tasks, which naturally occur during games (Vygotsky, 1978). These characteristics suggest that vocabulary learning for young learners should be contextual, interactive, and aligned with their natural tendency toward play.

Vocabulary is a fundamental component of language acquisition. Nation (2001) states that vocabulary mastery is the foundation for all language skills, including reading, writing, listening, and speaking. The main challenge in vocabulary learning lies in retention, which is the ability of students to remember and reuse vocabulary that has been learned within a specific period of time. Research in educational psychology shows that retention is influenced by repetition, meaningful context, active engagement, and student motivation (Schmitt, 2020). Vocabulary retention refers to the ability to remember and recall words that have been learned (Linh & Oanh, 2025). In this study, retention is understood not only as the ability to remember vocabulary but also the ability to use it appropriately in communicative contexts.

Gamification has become an innovative approach in English language teaching, particularly for young learners, because it creates more engaging and enjoyable learning experiences. Gamification refers to the application of game elements and mechanics in non-game contexts, such as education, to increase learners' motivation, engagement, and participation (Deterding et al., 2011). Gamification is the use of game-like elements and enjoyable activities to increase engagement, motivation, and participation in learning processes. By incorporating elements such as interaction, feedback, challenges, and trial-and-error experiences,

gamification can make learning activities more engaging, meaningful, and effective for learners (Kapp, 2012). Gee (2003) states that games create interactive, challenging, and enjoyable learning environments that can increase student motivation and engagement. In language learning, games can introduce new vocabulary, reinforce its use in meaningful contexts, and help strengthen memory through repetition. This approach aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) constructivist theory, which holds that learners build knowledge through direct experience and social interaction.

This conceptual framework connects three main concepts: gamification as a learning strategy that creates positive learning experiences, young learners' experiences as a focus of exploration to understand how students respond and engage in these activities, and vocabulary retention as a learning outcome that demonstrates students' ability to remember and reuse vocabulary learned through games. By integrating classical with empirical findings, this study assumes that positive learning experiences through gamification can support vocabulary retention among young learners.

The conceptual framework also incorporates multiple sources of evidence to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Students' learning experiences are explored through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews, while vocabulary retention is examined through delayed vocabulary tests administered at different intervals and also through semi-structured interviews. Case study research investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context and can rely on multiple sources of evidence to develop a comprehensive understanding of the case (Yin, 2018). This supports the use of classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and delayed vocabulary tests as different sources of evidence in the current research, which also focuses on developing a deep understanding of a particular case rather than seeking generalization (Stake, 1995). Therefore, the current study focuses on understanding students' learning experiences and vocabulary retention within the specific classroom context. For vocabulary retention, the delayed vocabulary tests provide descriptive evidence of students' ability to recall previously learned vocabulary over time. The delayed test

scores are used descriptively to illustrate patterns of retention across the testing periods rather than to statistically test the effectiveness of gamification. In this way, the different sources of evidence contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon within its specific classroom context.

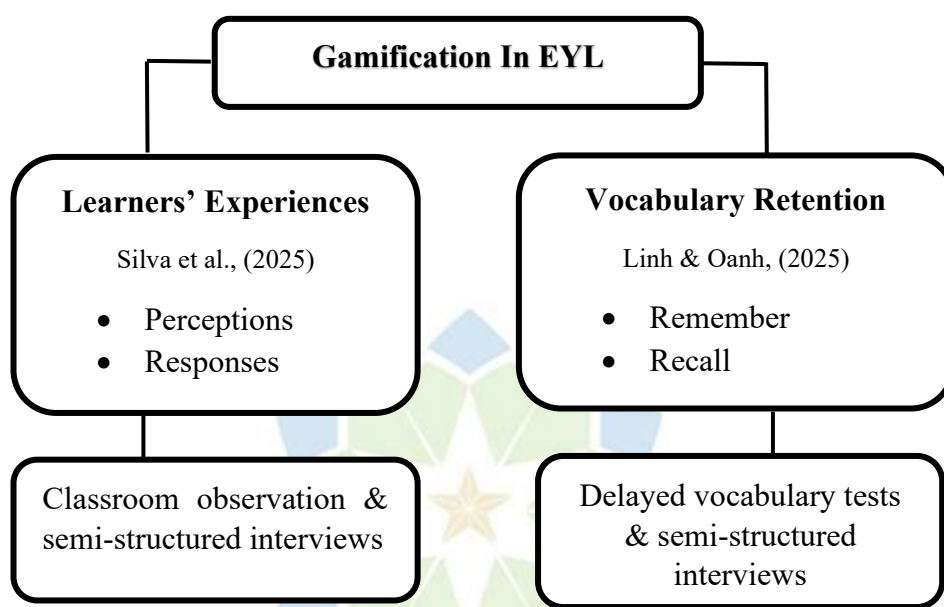


Figure 1. 1 Conceptual framework

G. Previous Studies

Several studies have examined vocabulary learning and retention among young learners through gamified or interactive instructional approaches. The first previous study, conducted by Namaziandost & Çakmak (2025), investigated the impact of AI-generated storytelling and gamified learning on EFL learners' vocabulary retention and engagement in Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) environments. The study employed a quantitative and qualitative experimental design with three groups: an AI-generated storytelling group, a gamified learning group, and a control group, using pre-test, immediate post-test, delayed post-test, questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews. The participants consisted of 90 intermediate-level Iranian EFL learners (B1 level), aged 20-27 years, who were randomly assigned into three groups of 30 participants each. The AI-generated storytelling group learned vocabulary through personalized AI-generated interactive stories, the gamified learning group used Duolingo, while the

control group learned through conventional vocabulary instruction using flashcards and quizzes. The findings revealed that AI-generated storytelling was the most effective approach for improving vocabulary retention and learner engagement, followed by gamified learning, while the traditional method showed the lowest performance.

The second study by Aco & Suwandi (2025), investigated the effect of gamified learning on students' motivation and vocabulary retention in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. The study employed a quasi-experimental design with gamified and non-gamified groups, using pre-test and post-test procedures, motivation questionnaires, vocabulary tests, and post-intervention reflection surveys. The participants consisted of 85 intermediate-level undergraduate EFL students from a public university in Indonesia, who were randomly assigned into two groups: 40 students in the gamified group and 45 students in the non-gamified group. The gamified group learned vocabulary through activities incorporating game elements such as points, badges, and leaderboards, while the non-gamified group received conventional vocabulary instruction. The findings revealed that gamified learning significantly improved students' motivation and vocabulary retention compared to traditional instruction. Moreover, students' motivation was positively correlated with vocabulary retention, indicating that higher motivation contributed to better vocabulary learning outcomes.

The third study conducted by Mohamed (2021), investigated the effectiveness of educational games in improving English vocabulary acquisition and retention among elementary students. The study employed a quasi-experimental design with control and experimental groups, including pre-test and post-test procedures. The participants consisted of 40 sixth-grade elementary school students divided into two groups: 20 students in the experimental group and 20 students in the control group, from elementary schools in Saudi Arabia, using teaching materials from the Get Ready 6 textbook. The experimental group learns through educational games, and the control group learns through conventional methods. The research showed that educational games are effective in improving elementary school students' English vocabulary acquisition and retention, while

also creating a more enjoyable learning environment, reducing anxiety, and boosting motivation to learn.

The fourth study by Su et al. (2021) applied an Interactive Storyboard Game (ISG) to help first-grade students retain English vocabulary they had learned, while addressing the problem of weak vocabulary retention resulting from conventional memorization-based methods. The study employed a mixed-methods approach with pre- and post-tests and observation notes, and was conducted over four weeks. The participants were 25 first-grade students (ages 6-7) from a Chinese national-type primary school in Padawan, Sarawak. They were learners of English as a second language, with Mandarin or Malay as their mother tongue. The study reported that 84% of learners showed measurable improvement in vocabulary retention after a four-week intervention. ISG has proven to be an effective and innovative strategy for strengthening vocabulary retention and creating a more enjoyable learning experience for lower-grade elementary school students. These findings highlight the effectiveness of structured, game-based tools for vocabulary learning. However, the study relied on a specially designed digital storyboard system, which limits its applicability in classrooms with limited access to technology.

The fifth study by Ersanli (2023), explored the integration of augmented reality (AR) with storytelling in vocabulary teaching among 5th-grade learners. The study employed a mixed-methods approach with a quantitative vocabulary test and qualitative group interviews. The participants consisted of 56 fifth-grade students, 28 in the experimental group using storytelling with AR, and 28 in the control group using storytelling with flashcards, with an A2 language proficiency level according to the CEFR. The results showed that students who learned vocabulary through AR materials demonstrated significantly higher retention than those taught with flashcards. Additionally, interview results revealed that students found AR more enjoyable and game-like. It increased their motivation and collaboration, and helped them remember vocabulary more easily. This finding indicates the potential of technology-supported learning in vocabulary instruction. However, the use of

AR requires advanced devices and teacher training, which may not be feasible in many public primary schools.

The sixth study by Nakjan et al.(2024), investigated the effectiveness of game-based learning using PowerPoint puzzle pictures to improve English vocabulary mastery among young EFL learners in Thailand. The study employed a one-group experimental design with a pre-test and post-test vocabulary assessment. The study spanned four weeks; students attended three 50-minute sessions per week, using puzzle games that included vocabulary aligned with the curriculum and different word categories, such as adjectives, nouns, verbs, and numbers. This study involved 40 fourth-grade students at Wat Chaisurin School who had English proficiency at the A1 level (CEFR). The results showed that PowerPoint-based puzzle games have proven effective as a vocabulary learning tool. While also creating a fun and interactive learning environment, making them have the potential to be used more widely in language learning as well as other subjects.

The seventh study by Hidayatullah et al. (2025), investigated the effectiveness of traditional games (board games, flashcards) and contemporary games (digital apps, multimedia) in enhancing vocabulary acquisition among EFL children aged 8-12 in Kesumen 2 village and Tuksongo village, Borobudur, Magelang. The study employed a qualitative design, using observation, interviews, and pre-test and post-test vocabulary learning. Data analysis used a paired, simple t-test to assess improvements in learning outcomes. The participants were 12 young learners aged 8-12 years, guided by three English teachers. The learning intervention was conducted three times weekly using educational games such as flashcards, word puzzles, and board games, as well as songs and narrative stories to provide language context. Additionally, multimedia, including videos, PPTs, and interactive applications, was used to enhance engagement and vocabulary retention. The results indicate that game-based learning, whether traditional or digital, is effective in improving vocabulary acquisition among EFL learners.

Previous studies have shown that gamification and game-based learning can improve vocabulary acquisition, vocabulary retention, motivation, engagement, and learners' enjoyment in different learning contexts. Various learning methods,

such as educational games, interactive storyboards, augmented reality, PowerPoint-based puzzle games, AI-generated storytelling, and game elements like points, badges, and leaderboards, have been found to support students' vocabulary learning. However, most previous studies focused on digital or technology-based gamification and mainly measured learning outcomes using quantitative methods. Only a few studies have explored young learners' learning experiences during simple, non-digital classroom gamification activities, especially in public elementary schools. Therefore, the current study addresses an important research gap by exploring the experiences of young learners and their vocabulary retention through simple, non-digital classroom gamification activities that can be implemented without advanced technology in a public elementary school classroom. The study specifically focuses on structural gamification, in which game-like elements are incorporated into regular vocabulary learning activities without changing the instructional content or learning objectives. The activities include matching cards, sentence building, jumbled-sentence rotation, picture guessing, and peer interaction.

