

# Game-Based Instruction: The Impact of Taboo on Students' Vocabulary Development

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## ABSTRACT

English vocabulary serves as an essential basis for enhancing students' communicative competence. However, numerous EFL learners still struggle to master this component, and there is a limited amount of research exploring the use of the Taboo Game as a vocabulary enhancement tool in junior high school settings. Therefore, this research seeks to investigate how the Taboo Game can enhance the vocabulary mastery of seventh-grade students at SMP Negeri Model Terpadu Madani. This research employed a quasi-experimental approach, involving two classes: VII Lamalonda, the experimental group, and VII Erwin Sumampau, the control group, which were selected through purposive sampling. The study utilised pre-tests and post-tests as instruments to assess students' vocabulary performance. The findings showed that the experimental group's post-test mean score (88) exceeded that of the control group (61). The analysis using SPSS 27 showed that the significance value (Asymp. Sig. 2-tailed) of 0.000 was below the 0.05 threshold, indicating that the alternative hypothesis ( $H_a$ ) was accepted. These findings suggest that the Taboo Game is an effective tool for enhancing students' vocabulary mastery in English language instruction. This highlights that the implementation of the Taboo Game can foster active participation, motivation, and retention of vocabulary.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary refers to the collection of words in a language that people use in communication. It is inseparable from language learning because it is a foundation for developing other skills. The ability to comprehend and express ideas in the target language largely depends on learners' mastery of vocabulary. Aprianto et al. [1] claim that vocabulary enables students to understand texts, participate in conversations, and express

their thoughts effectively. Thus, enriching students' vocabulary is a key element in achieving overall language proficiency.

In the context of teaching vocabulary at the junior high school level under the Emancipated Curriculum, students are expected to acquire a sufficient vocabulary to communicate effectively both orally and in writing. However, preliminary observations at SMP Negeri Model Terpadu Madani revealed that many students possessed limited vocabulary knowledge and struggled to understand word meanings and usage. These difficulties hindered their ability to comprehend and use the language effectively. Therefore, more interactive and engaging instructional approaches are required to support vocabulary learning and address these challenges.

One promising approach to vocabulary instruction is the use of games, namely, the Taboo Game. As a culturally rooted and interactive activity, the Taboo Game creates an engaging learning environment that encourages active participation. According to Lestari and Damanik [2], this game serves as a novel and effective strategy for vocabulary instruction in English, as it enables learners to focus on word meaning and usage in a relaxed, anxiety-free atmosphere. Similarly, Yaacob et al. [3] confirm that the Taboo Game enjoyably facilitates vocabulary learning, helping students overcome fear and tension commonly experienced in conventional classroom settings. Moreover, Pollmann & Krahmer [4] emphasise that playful interaction with peers enhances learners' motivation, engagement, and language production. This aligns with Lee [5], who found that game-based vocabulary learning significantly boosts retention and encourages the active application of new vocabulary in relevant contexts. Moreover, Yudinseva [6] demonstrated that game-enhanced learning supports effective vocabulary acquisition through contextual clues, peer interaction, and imagery, promoting more productive use of vocabulary in communicative tasks. Overall, the implementation of the Taboo Game promotes collaboration and communication among students, thereby fostering both confidence and sustained motivation in language learning.

Previous studies have demonstrated the potential of the Taboo Game; however, they primarily examined students' perceptions or general vocabulary recall, with mixed findings. Lestari and Damanik [2] reported improvements in motivation, confidence, and vocabulary recall, whereas Agustina [7] found that the game encouraged participation but did not significantly enhance vocabulary acquisition. Despite these insights, previous studies focused on perceptions or general vocabulary recall, but none examined how students apply vocabulary in meaningful sentence construction during game-based activities. This gap highlights the need to investigate vocabulary use within communicative and contextualised tasks. Therefore, this study aims to examine the effectiveness of the Taboo Game in enhancing seventh-grade students' vocabulary mastery, particularly their ability to apply vocabulary in constructing meaningful sentences, both orally and in writing. The hypothesis proposes that students taught using the Taboo Game will demonstrate significantly better vocabulary application compared to those taught using conventional methods. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on the practical use of vocabulary within sentence construction—a dimension that extends beyond mere

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vocabulary recall and contributes to a deeper understanding of game-based language instruction.

## 2. METHOD

This study employed a **quasi-experimental design** involving two groups: an experimental group and a control group. Both groups were administered a pre-test and a post-test. However, only the experimental group received the treatment using the Taboo Game, while the control class was taught using the teacher's traditional approach. Following the treatment, both groups completed a post-test to measure any improvement in vocabulary mastery.

Table 1. The Experimental Design

Groups	Pre-test	Independent Variable	Posttest
Experimental Group	O <sub>1</sub>	X	O <sub>2</sub>
Control Group	O <sub>3</sub>		O <sub>4</sub>

Where :

- O<sub>1</sub> and O<sub>3</sub> : Pre-test  
 X : Treatment  
 O<sub>2</sub> and O<sub>4</sub> : Post-test

The population in this research consisted of all seventh-grade students at SMP Negeri Model Terpadu Madani, totalling 163 students across six parallel classes: VII Karajalemba, VII Sis-Aljufri, VII Erwin Sumampau, VII Lamalonda, VII Hasan Bahasuan, and VII Bantilan. Each class comprised approximately 32 students.

A purposive sampling technique was used to choose the participants. Purposive sampling is a non-random method in which the sample is chosen based on specific characteristics relevant to the research objectives Isah et al., [8]. In this study, two classes with comparable vocabulary mastery levels and similar academic schedules were purposively selected. Class VII Lamalonda was designated as the experimental group, while Class VII Erwin Sumampau served as the control group. This selection ensured a fair and balanced comparison between the groups.

The primary instrument of this research was a vocabulary test, which consisted of two parts: multiple-choice items and sentence construction tasks. Pre-tests and post-tests were administered to assess students' vocabulary mastery before and after the treatment, which was conducted over six meetings, each lasting 80 minutes. During the treatment phase, the experimental group received instruction through the Taboo Game, which integrated vocabulary learning through interactive and communicative tasks. Meanwhile, the control group proceeded with the teacher's conventional method, using the whiteboard and textbook-based exercises.

Some procedures were as follows:

- Before starting the game, the teacher explained the rules and how to play the taboo game. The teacher also gave a short example by asking some students to try it, so everyone could understand how the game works and what the rules are.
- Once the students knew the rules, the teacher split them into four teams.

- Then, the first team took turns pointing to their teammates, who came to the front of the class to pick up a taboo card prepared by the teacher. This card was used as a guide.
- After that, the teacher picked one student from the second team to watch and make sure the clue-giver from the first team did not say any of the five forbidden words.
- The clue-givers had three minutes to explain the word on their card so their teammates could guess it without using the five taboo words.
- If their teammates guessed it right, the team would then name the type of word and describe it, and team one would get one point. But if the clue-giver said a forbidden word, they lost one point.
- Then, it was team two's turn to choose a teammate to take the taboo card and do the same as team one. Team three did the same.
- The game continued with each team taking turns until all students had played. The team with the most points won.

Table 2. Scoring System

No	Kinds of test	Number of items	Score of each item	Total score
1	Multiple Choice	20	1	20
2	Making simple sentences	6	2	12
	Total			32

The vocabulary test and instructional activities targeted three dimensions of vocabulary knowledge :

- **Form** recognition and correct orthography of words; part of speech identification (e.g., noun, verb, adjective). Items assessing form check whether students can select/spell or identify the correct lexical form.
- **Meaning** semantic knowledge of words: definitions, synonyms/antonyms, and appropriate semantic interpretation in context. Items assessing meaning examine whether students understand what a word denotes.
- **Usage** productive application of vocabulary in context: ability to construct grammatically correct and meaningful sentences using target words, appropriate collocations, and register. Sentence-construction tasks primarily measure this dimension.

Next, the collected data from the pre-test and post-test were processed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software (Wahyudi [9]). Descriptive and inferential analyses were conducted to determine the mean scores, standard deviations, and the significance of the differences between the two groups. The analysis aimed to determine whether the Taboo Game resulted in a significant improvement in students' vocabulary mastery compared to conventional instruction.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After collecting, calculating, and analysing the data, the results are presented as follows:

#### 3.1. Results

The descriptive statistics table shows the pre-test and post-test results for both the experimental and control groups.

Table 3. Pre-test Results of the Experimental and Control Groups

	Descriptive Statistics				
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-Test Experimental	32	38	66	50.28	7.822
Pre-Test Control	32	34	66	50.03	7.386
Valid N (listwise)	32				

The descriptive results show that the experimental and control groups achieved nearly identical mean scores on the pre-test (50.28 vs. 50.03). This indicates that both groups possessed a comparable level of initial vocabulary mastery. Such equivalence strengthens the internal validity of the study, since it indicates that any differences observed in the post-test are more likely due to the Taboo Game treatment rather than pre-existing disparities.

Table 4. Post-test Results of the Experimental and Control Groups

	Descriptive Statistics				
	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pos-test Experimental	32	47	97	87.69	11.029
Pos-test Control	32	53	72	61.38	5.104
Valid N (listwise)	32				

The post-test results reveal a substantial difference between the two groups. The experimental group achieved a mean score of 87.69, while the control group obtained a mean score of 61.38. This significant increase suggests that students taught using the Taboo Game demonstrated greater improvement in vocabulary mastery than those taught through traditional teaching methods. These results indicate that the Taboo Game has a positive influence on students' vocabulary acquisition.

Table 5. Normality Test Results

Group	Tests of Normality						
	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>			Shapiro-Wilk			
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.	
Vocabulary Mastery	Pre-test Control	.153	32	.054	.955	32	.204
	Posttest Control	.179	32	.010	.928	32	.034
	Pre-test Experimental	.111	32	.200*	.959	32	.263
	Posttest Experimental	.243	32	.000	.752	32	.000

Based on both the Kolmogorov–Smirnov and Shapiro–Wilk tests, the pre-test scores of both groups met the normality assumption, with significance values higher than 0.05. However, the post-test scores of both groups showed significance values below 0.05, which means the post-test data did not follow a normal distribution. Since the normality assumption was violated in the post-test, a non-parametric statistical procedure was required to ensure appropriate and valid analysis.

Table 6. Test of Homogeneity of Variances

		Test of Homogeneity of Variance			
		Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
Vocabulary Mastery	Based on Mean	.615	1	62	.436
	Based on Median	.546	1	62	.463
	Based on Median and with adjusted df	.546	1	61.548	.463
	Based on trimmed mean	.560	1	62	.457

Levene’s test indicated that all significance values were above 0.05, indicating that the variances of the two groups were homogeneous. Despite this, the violation of the normality assumption meant that the analysis still required the use of non-parametric tests.

Table 7. Mann-Whitney U Test

Test Statistics <sup>a</sup>	
Vocabulary Mastery	
Mann-Whitney U	47.000
Wilcoxon W	575.000
Z	-6.279
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.000

a. Grouping Variable: Group

The Mann–Whitney U test was used to analyse the differences in vocabulary mastery between the experimental and control groups. The results showed a U value of 47.000 and a Z value of –6.279. Most notably, the significance value (Asymp. Sig. 2-tailed) was 0.000, which is below the 0.05 threshold. This indicates a statistically significant difference between the two groups. Therefore, it can be interpreted that the Taboo Game significantly improved students’ vocabulary mastery. Outperforming the traditional instructional approach applied in the control group, which relied primarily on whiteboard instruction and textbook-based exercises.

### 3.2. Discussion

The results of this research showed that students’ vocabulary proficiency was still quite limited before the treatment, as reflected in the pre-test scores of both the experimental and control groups. Students demonstrated a limited ability to identify word meanings, recognise word forms, and use vocabulary accurately in simple sentence constructions. These initial conditions align with those of Selviana et al. [10], who reported that many learners continue to experience limited vocabulary knowledge and low

motivation, particularly when exposed to conventional and repetitive instructional techniques. Nurjannah and Pratama [11] similarly noted that students often experience difficulties recalling vocabulary and applying it in contextual situations. Meanwhile, Nguyen et al. [12] emphasised that vocabulary acquisition remains one of the most challenging components for EFL learners, especially for beginners who require structured and meaningful exposure to new words. Furthermore, Nurfadilah et al. [13] highlighted that traditional approaches, such as rote memorisation and translation, tend to reduce student engagement, leading to weak long-term retention. Collectively, these findings underscore the need for more interactive and student-centred approaches to support effective vocabulary development in the classroom.

After implementing the treatment, the results confirmed a clear improvement in the experimental group that received instruction through the Taboo Game compared with the control group, which received conventional instruction. The use of the Taboo Game provided learners with meaningful, communicative, and enjoyable experiences that facilitated better understanding of vocabulary. This is consistent with Tefa et al. [14], who argued that games sustain students' interest and encourage active participation in learning tasks. The noticeable increase in post-test scores among the students in the experimental group supports the assertions of Permatasari et al. [15], who found that game-based learning fosters a positive learning atmosphere and enhances vocabulary mastery effectively. Similarly, Pratiwi et al. [16] reported that students demonstrate higher enjoyment and improved vocabulary performance when learning through digital or game-based activities. Meanwhile, Armelia et al. [17] confirmed that card-based games can significantly enhance vocabulary retention and engagement. These findings suggest that the Taboo Game not only enhances students' lexical knowledge but also fosters engagement, motivation, and meaningful practice.

The improvement in the experimental group can be explained through several learning theories. Based on Swain's Output Hypothesis, the Taboo Game pushes students to produce language by paraphrasing and describing words, helping them notice gaps in their vocabulary. At the same time, Krashen's Input Hypothesis is reflected through the comprehensible input students receive when listening to peers' clues, which supports meaningful vocabulary acquisition. Additionally, the game promotes behavioural, emotional, and cognitive involvement, as described in Cognitive Engagement Theory, requiring students to think critically, collaborate, and remain actively engaged throughout the activity. Together, these theoretical perspectives explain why students achieved better understanding, retention, and application of vocabulary after the Taboo Game treatment.

The results also align with earlier studies that emphasise the instructional benefits of using the Taboo Game in language learning. Research by Siregar and Fhitriani [18] demonstrated that the Taboo Game enhances learners' enthusiasm and competitive spirit, which are essential factors in sustaining motivation during language learning. Lestari and Damanik [2] further noted that the game encourages active participation and supports the retention of new vocabulary. Additionally, Sari and Agung [19] argued that the Taboo Game increases students' ability to memorise and apply vocabulary more effectively, illustrating how interactive approaches can scaffold vocabulary development in EFL

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contexts. The convergence between the present findings and earlier studies reinforces the notion that the Taboo Game is a valuable instructional tool for vocabulary learning.

In contrast, students in the control group showed only a modest improvement after receiving traditional vocabulary instruction. Teacher-centred methods, which dominate conventional classrooms, limit opportunities for interaction, creativity, and communicative practice. As stated by Hanafiah et al. [20], conventional approaches fail to enhance language competence effectively because they restrict learners' active involvement. Hayati et al. [21] similarly observed that such methods reduce student motivation and inhibit knowledge retention as learners remain passive recipients of information. Supporting this, Bawamenewi et al. [22] claimed that traditional learning approaches are less effective than game-based or problem-based strategies, as they do not provide experiential or contextual learning opportunities. The minimal gain in the control group underscores the limitations of conventional teaching in fostering meaningful vocabulary development.

This study differs from prior research by focusing not only on students' recognition of vocabulary but also on their ability to use vocabulary in sentence construction, which reflects a deeper, more productive level of vocabulary mastery. While many earlier studies measured vocabulary through recognition-based tests, this study incorporated sentence-production tasks that evaluate learners' real communicative competence. This emphasis on productive vocabulary use strengthens the contribution of the present research to the field of EFL instruction.

Overall, the findings of this study confirm that the Taboo Game is an effective instructional medium for improving students' vocabulary mastery. Students in the experimental group present greater improvement in recognising, understanding, and using vocabulary within meaningful contexts. These outcomes align with Al-Ahdal and Alqasham [23], who reported that interactive vocabulary games enhance learners' motivation and facilitate higher retention compared to conventional methods. Moreover, Sitanggang and Nababan [24] found that game-based instruction helps students associate vocabulary with engaging and memorable learning experiences. Alibakhshi et al. [25] also emphasised that educational games support vocabulary learning by promoting immersion, active participation, and sustained motivation. Taken together, these findings suggest that integrating the Taboo Game in EFL classrooms can significantly enhance vocabulary acquisition and promote more engaging and effective learning environments.

This study has several limitations. The short treatment duration and the use of only two classes from one school restrict the generalizability and the ability to measure long-term effects. The vocabulary focus was limited to specific word categories, and the assessments were confined to classroom-based written tests, not real communicative performance. Additionally, variations in teacher delivery and class dynamics may have impacted the results. These limitations suggest the need for longer interventions, broader samples, more comprehensive vocabulary coverage, and varied assessment methods in future research.

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#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study highlights that incorporating the Taboo Game into vocabulary instruction supports a more engaging and meaningful learning experience for students. The use of interactive, game-based strategies fosters a learning environment that encourages active participation and enhances vocabulary development. The findings suggest several pedagogical implications. Teachers can integrate game-based activities as complementary tools to enrich traditional instruction, while schools may consider providing greater access to interactive media to enhance student involvement. Additionally, teacher training programs can incorporate game-based approaches to equip educators with strategies for designing engaging and effective vocabulary lessons. However, the scope of this research is limited to a single educational setting, a specific grade level, and a limited duration of intervention. These boundaries may restrict the generalizability of the findings to broader populations or long-term learning outcomes. Future researchers are encouraged to examine the application of the Taboo Game across different proficiency levels, educational contexts, and extended time periods. Further exploration of its use in other language skills—such as speaking, reading comprehension, or collaborative communication—may also broaden its pedagogical value. Overall, this study contributes to the general public and educational practitioners by demonstrating the potential of game-based learning to support vocabulary development and enrich language learning environments.

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