

Acting, Guessing, Learning: Communicative Games as a Strategy to Boost Vocabulary Mastery in Young EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary knowledge is a cornerstone of language proficiency and serves as the foundation for effective communication in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. Yet, many young learners continue to struggle with vocabulary retention when taught through conventional approaches, which are often limited to rote memorization and isolated word lists. Responding to this gap, the present study investigates the effectiveness of communicative games as an engaging instructional strategy to enhance vocabulary mastery among young EFL learners. Employing a pre-experimental design with one-group pre-test and post-test, 21 participants from Ganesha English College in Lubuklinggau were assessed through multiple-choice vocabulary tests. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, minimum mastery criteria comparison, and paired sample t-tests. The findings reveal a significant improvement in learners' vocabulary scores after the treatment, confirming that communicative games foster not only better retention but also deeper word association in meaningful contexts. These results demonstrate that communicative games create an interactive and enjoyable learning environment, motivating learners to actively engage with new vocabulary. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on game-based language learning by highlighting communicative games as a practical and effective pedagogical tool in EFL classrooms. The implications extend to broader educational contexts, suggesting that integrating interactive game-based methods can support vocabulary acquisition, enhance communicative competence, and inform curriculum design for young learners in diverse EFL settings.

1. Introduction

Globalization and digital transformation have intensified the need for strong pedagogical competence. The Act of the Republic of Indonesia Number 14 Year 2005 defines pedagogic competence as the ability to manage student learning, personality competence as the embodiment of character and wisdom, and professional competence as mastery of subject matter. Despite increased education budgets and higher teacher salaries, progress remains limited. The 2016 UNESCO Global Education Monitoring (GEM) report ranked Indonesia 10th out of 14 developing countries, reflecting persistent quality gaps. The 2015 Teacher Competency Test (UKG) reported a low national average of 44.4, far below the expected standard of 75 (Sharif & Cho, 2015). Pedagogical competence, which integrates understanding of students, learning theories, curriculum design, instructional strategies, communication, and assessment, continues to be a crucial yet underdeveloped area (Palkova & Sapozhnikova, 2021).

Instructional design models such as ADDIE provide structured guidance through analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation (Pribadi & Chung, 2023; Ritzhaupt & Kumar, 2015; Park & Kim, 2022). Similarly, Anderson and Krathwohl's revision of Bloom's Taxonomy aligns instruction with learner needs and supports more meaningful outcomes (Kang & Ritzhaupt, 2015). Effective teaching requires not only subject mastery but also inclusive and student-centered environments (Prasetya, 2021). Educators must also harness technology to expand accessibility and engagement in both conventional and online learning (Mahmood, 2024; Sani et al., 2019; Thaysen, 2020; Khaerati, 2016).

However, many lecturers still depend on monotonous lecture methods and limited research engagement, which reduces their role to that of knowledge transmitters rather than facilitators of creativity. Studies show that interactive methods increase student engagement (Nyer, 2019), while teaching effectiveness is shaped by delivery as much as by content (White et al., 2018). Fostering creativity requires the integration of learner characteristics,

supportive environments, and innovative pedagogy (Aichouni et al., 2015). Approaches such as Problem-Based Learning (PBL) enhance professional creativity and enrich the teaching process (Pozilova, 2023). In contexts such as Indonesia, which is undergoing educational reform, these methods are essential for addressing global challenges (Murphy & Stewart, 2015). Active learning has repeatedly been linked to improved outcomes (Kahn et al., 2016; Dost et al., 2020; Benamer & Stanley, 2023), while collaborative and creative pedagogies have proven effective in transforming classrooms (Tacuri et al., 2024).

Rigid teaching systems have made pedagogical competence a burden, slowing growth, limiting interaction, and weakening students' critical thinking. Low competence also hinders character formation needed for the transition from Industrial Revolution 4.0 to 5.0. Lecturers who lack pedagogical competence often struggle to adapt to digitalization, leaving education poorly equipped to compete globally. Improving pedagogical competence is therefore vital to ensure that Indonesian education evolves competitively in a globalized context. English now occupies a central role as a global lingua franca, serving as the main medium for academic, professional, and social mobility. It requires mastery of receptive and productive skills (Harmer, 2007) and achieves global status when recognized internationally (Crystal, 1997). Within this framework, vocabulary learning is one of the most critical elements of language acquisition. Without adequate vocabulary, learners cannot effectively communicate, comprehend texts, or engage in meaningful interaction. Educational games have been recognized as valuable because they transform learning into an enjoyable experience (Donmus, 2010). Teaching vocabulary in isolation, however, remains problematic because words cannot be learned effectively without context (Al Neyadi, 2007). Activities that embed vocabulary in interactive tasks foster retention and enhance communicative competence (Turgut & Irgin, 2009).

Vocabulary is the largest component of language learning (McCarthy, 1991). Learners with limited vocabulary tend to produce repetitive speech that reduces communicative effectiveness (Sorayaie-Azar, 2012). Interviews at Ganesha English College Lubuklinggau revealed challenges in pronunciation, spelling, inflections, contextual usage, idiomatic expressions, and memorization. Communicative games show strong potential to address these issues because they combine gesture, context, and collaboration (Hidayati, 2016; Harmer, 2007; Mackey, 2007). Their use reflects a historical shift from rote memorization to communicative approaches in the 1970s and 1980s. Although research has examined educational or digital games in EFL contexts (Farrah, 2014; Saha & Singh, 2016; Nuraihan & Farrah, 2013), few studies have investigated communicative games specifically with young learners in Indonesia.

This study addresses this gap by investigating communicative games as innovative and learner-centered strategies for vocabulary mastery. Unlike digital approaches, communicative games emphasize embodied learning, peer collaboration, and contextual guessing. The novelty lies in applying these methods to young Indonesian learners, offering insights into interactive strategies that are underexplored in this context. The study also seeks to provide teachers with practical evidence on how communicative games support retention, contextual understanding, and motivation.

Recent developments in language education highlight the growing importance of game-based learning as an alternative to rote memorization. Digital games have received significant attention for their motivational impact, multimodal design, and interactive features. At the same time, physical communicative games are emerging as powerful tools because they engage learners in context-rich, embodied activities that foster collaboration and communication. Studies in diverse regions such as Europe, the Middle East, and Asia demonstrate their effectiveness in vocabulary retention and learner motivation. Yet most of this research has focused on digital formats or older learners, leaving young learners in Indonesia largely overlooked. By situating communicative games within this evolving discourse, the present study contributes to the state of the art by extending theories of game-based learning into a new cultural and age-specific context while providing empirical evidence of their pedagogical value.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Centrality of Vocabulary in Language Learning

Vocabulary is a fundamental element of second language acquisition and strongly influences learners' communicative competence. Anderson (2011) described teaching as a multidimensional process that is mental, social, physical, emotional, practical, and cultural, requiring careful instructional design. Brown (2010) also noted that effective teaching goes beyond lecturing to involve strategies that motivate and guide learners, while Kyriacou (2007) emphasized that successful teaching depends on purposeful learning activities. These perspectives show that vocabulary instruction must be meaningful and well-planned, supporting not only linguistic knowledge but also practical communicative use.

2.2 Challenges in Vocabulary Instruction

Conventional vocabulary teaching has been criticized for its limited impact. Al Neyadi (2007) argued that presenting words in isolation prevents meaningful learning. Learners often struggle with pronunciation, spelling, meaning selection, and using vocabulary appropriately in context. Sorayaie-Azar (2012) emphasized that authentic communicative

practice is needed to address these difficulties. McCarten (2007) added that vocabulary teaching should be informed by corpus evidence so that learners acquire words relevant to real communication. These insights highlight the need for more interactive and learner-centered approaches that foster vocabulary retention, contextual understanding, and practical application.

2.3 Educational Games in Vocabulary Learning

Games have become widely acknowledged as effective tools in vocabulary instruction. Donmus (2010) argued that games enhance language education by making it more enjoyable, while Turgut and İrgin (2009) found that computer games support memorization through interactive experiences. Studies by Sorayaie-Azar (2012) and Derakhshan and Khafir (2015) showed that games increase motivation and communicative competence. Lorenzutti (2016) further explained that vocabulary games are more than play, since they encourage active participation and creativity. Similar findings were reported by Quispe (2016), who observed improved vocabulary among Peruvian primary learners, and Bavi (2018), who found that fun activities significantly enhanced retention at the elementary level. Collectively, these studies suggest that games make vocabulary learning more interactive, memorable, and motivating, thereby offering valuable implications for English language teaching.

2.4 Graphics

Among the many types of games, communicative games stand out for promoting collaboration, gesture, and context. Hidayati (2016) described them as activities where learners mime or act out words for peers to guess, creating embodied and contextual learning. Harmer (2007) emphasized the value of mime and gesture in clarifying meaning, while Aslanabadi and Rasouli (2013) showed that games enhanced vocabulary retention among Iranian kindergarten learners. DeHaan, Reed, and Kuwada (2010) also demonstrated that interactive video games supported vocabulary recall in second language contexts. Although these findings highlight the value of games, most studies have focused on digital or general educational games (Farrah, 2014; Nuraihan & Farrah, 2013; Saha & Singh, 2016). Few have examined communicative games based on physical interaction and collaboration, and very limited research has explored their effectiveness in Indonesia, where young learners face challenges in pronunciation, spelling, contextual word use, and idiomatic expressions.

This study addresses these gaps by exploring communicative games as a non-digital, classroom-based strategy tailored to Indonesian EFL learners. Its novelty lies in showing how embodied interaction and

peer collaboration can enhance vocabulary mastery beyond enjoyment alone. By focusing on retention, contextual application, and communicative competence, the study contributes to the literature on game-based learning and offers teachers evidence-based strategies for creating engaging, learner-centered classrooms.

3. Method

This study employed a pre-experimental research design with a one-group pre-test and post-test model to examine the effectiveness of communicative games in improving vocabulary mastery among young EFL learners. Such a design was selected because it allows researchers to compare learners' performance before and after treatment, thereby identifying significant changes attributable to the intervention (Creswell, 2012).

3.1 Participants

The population of this study consisted of young learners at Ganesha English College in Lubuklinggau. A total of 21 participants were enrolled, representing the accessible sample for the research. These learners were chosen because they shared common vocabulary challenges, including pronunciation, spelling, contextual use, and retention, which made them suitable subjects for examining the impact of communicative games in EFL learning.

3.2 Instruments

Data were collected using a multiple-choice vocabulary test, which served as both the pre-test and post-test instrument. The test was designed to measure learners' knowledge of targeted vocabulary items and their ability to recognize correct meanings in context. In line with Creswell (2012), the instrument was evaluated for reliability, ensuring that the results were consistent and stable across repeated administrations. Reliability in this context referred to the capacity of the test to yield constant results, even when applied to the same group of learners more than once.

3.3 Procedures and Data Collection

The research procedure was conducted in three stages: pre-test, treatment, and post-test. First, learners completed the pre-test to determine their initial vocabulary mastery. The treatment was then implemented using communicative games in classroom settings. During these activities, learners were instructed to act out or mime vocabulary items while their peers attempted to guess the correct words, as suggested by Hidayati (2016) and Harmer (2007). This interactive, learner-centered approach was expected to engage learners more deeply than traditional rote memorization methods. Finally, learners were administered the post-test, which contained equivalent vocabulary items to those in the pre-test, to assess improvements in mastery after the intervention.

3.4 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through several statistical procedures to ensure both descriptive and inferential insights. Individual scores were first calculated to examine learner performance, and range scores were used to identify score distribution. The normality of data was tested to confirm the appropriateness of subsequent parametric analysis. A paired sample t-test was then conducted to compare pre-test and post-test results, as recommended in experimental research for evaluating significant differences between two related means (Creswell, 2012). Additional analyses included comparison against the Minimum Mastery Criteria to determine how many learners achieved the expected learning outcomes.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

Although this was a small-scale classroom-based study, ethical considerations were taken into account. Learners participated voluntarily, were informed about the purpose of the study, and their responses

were treated with confidentiality. The use of games ensured a positive and stress-free learning environment, supporting both pedagogical and ethical responsibilities.

4. Result

4.1 Learners' Performance in the Pre-test

The pre-test was conducted to establish the learners' initial vocabulary mastery before the treatment was applied. The results revealed a generally weak performance. The highest score obtained was 72, achieved by two learners, while the lowest score was 40, also recorded by two learners. The mean score was 57.9, which indicated that the overall level of vocabulary mastery was still below the minimum

mastery criteria. Notably, 86 percent of the learners failed to meet the expected standard, showing that only a small minority demonstrated sufficient competence at this stage.

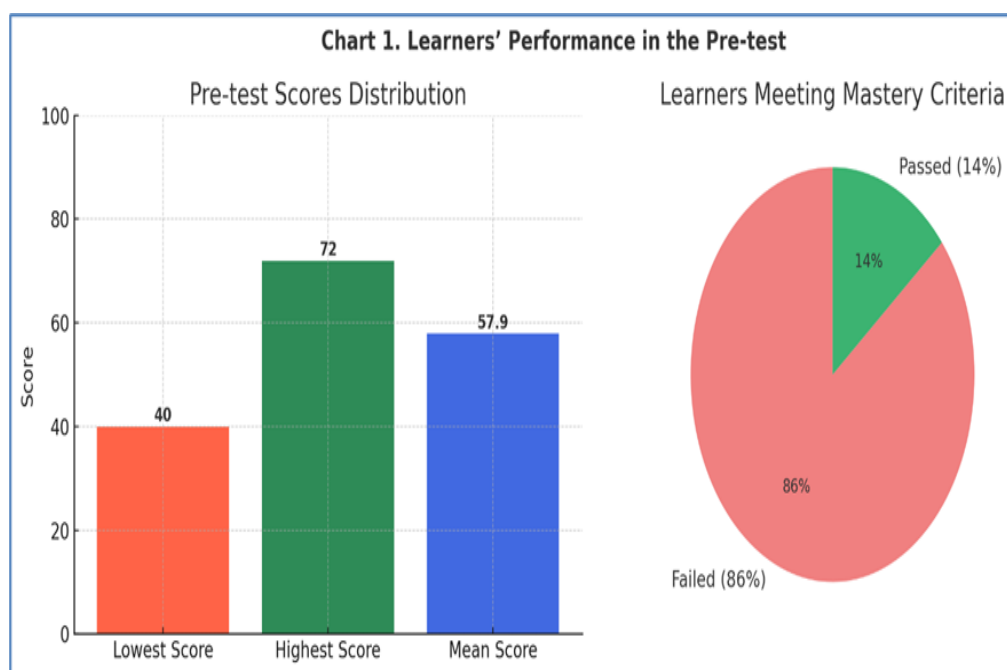


Chart 1. presents the distribution of scores in the pre-test.

The figure shows that the majority of learners clustered below the passing threshold, reflecting a lack of sufficient vocabulary knowledge across the group. This distribution is not only an indication of learners' struggles in recognizing and recalling vocabulary but also a sign of their difficulties in applying words within appropriate contexts. The relatively wide gap between the highest and lowest scores further suggests variations in learners' initial vocabulary ability, although the overall trend points to low achievement.

The analysis of these findings highlights several critical points. First, the large proportion of learners who did not achieve mastery underscores the inadequacy of traditional vocabulary learning methods that rely heavily on memorization and repetition. Second, the results demonstrate that most learners lacked both breadth and depth of vocabulary, which limited their ability to use words effectively in communication. Finally, the relatively low mean score reveals that vocabulary development among young EFL learners is still an area requiring serious pedagogical attention.

From an interpretative standpoint, the pre-test results clearly confirm the need for a more engaging and supportive instructional strategy. The struggles reflected in Chart 1 suggest that learners were not yet able to link new words with meaningful contexts, making it difficult for them to retain and use vocabulary effectively. The findings therefore provided a strong rationale for implementing communicative games as an alternative learning approach. By incorporating gestures, interaction, and contextual guessing, such games were expected to create a more motivating environment that could address the weaknesses observed in the pre-test and foster better vocabulary acquisition.

4.2 Learners' Performance in the Post-test

After the treatment with communicative games, the post-test results showed a substantial improvement in learners' vocabulary mastery. The highest score recorded was 92, achieved by one learner, while the lowest score increased to 60, obtained by two learners. The mean score rose to 73.9, reflecting a marked improvement compared with the pre-test mean of 57.9. Importantly, 18 of the 21 participants successfully met the minimum mastery criteria, leaving only three below the threshold. These results indicate that the majority of learners not only improved their performance but also achieved the expected level of vocabulary competence.

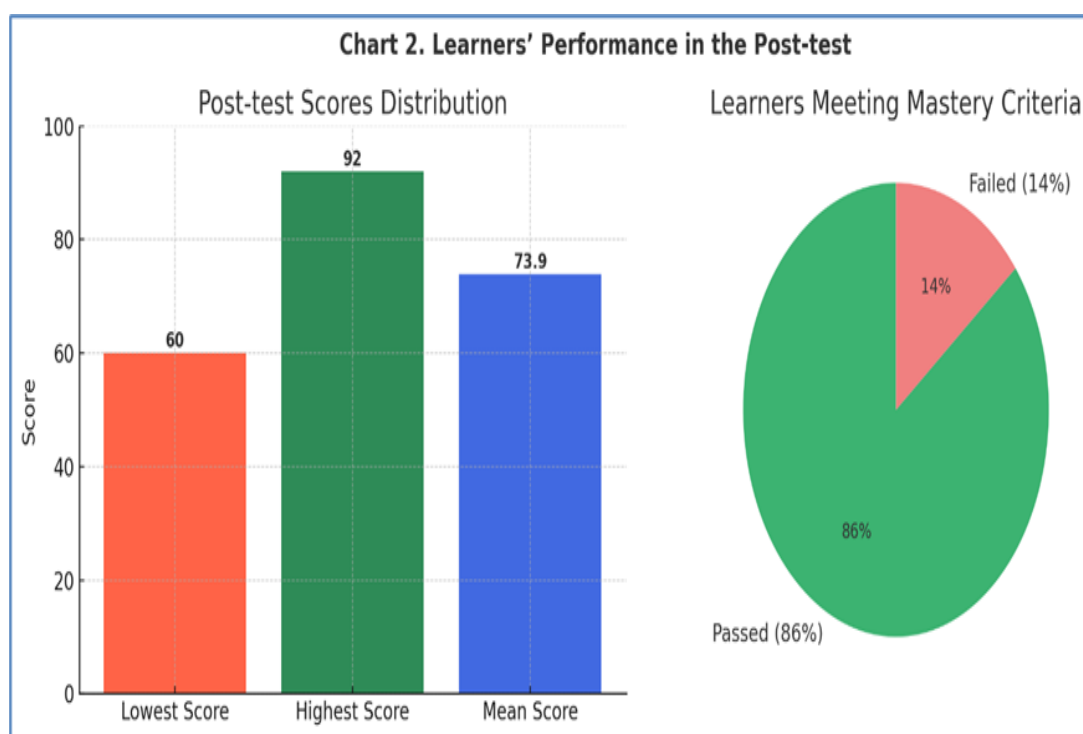


Chart 2. illustrates the percentage of learners who met the minimum mastery criteria in the post-test.

4.3 Comparative Analysis of Pre-test and Post-test Results

A direct comparison between pre-test and post-test results further demonstrates the effectiveness of communicative games in enhancing learners' vocabulary mastery. In the pre-test, the mean score was 57.9, and the majority of learners failed to reach the minimum mastery criteria. In the post-test, however, the mean rose to 73.9, with most learners successfully achieving mastery. This upward shift highlights a clear improvement in vocabulary acquisition across the group.

The statistical analysis reinforced these findings. The paired sample t-test produced a value of 12.649, which was considerably higher than the critical value of 1.724 at the 0.05 significance level. The resulting significance value of 0.000 confirmed that the difference between pre-test and post-test scores was not due to random variation but was directly attributable to the intervention. These results provide strong quantitative evidence that communicative games had a significant positive impact on learners' vocabulary performance.

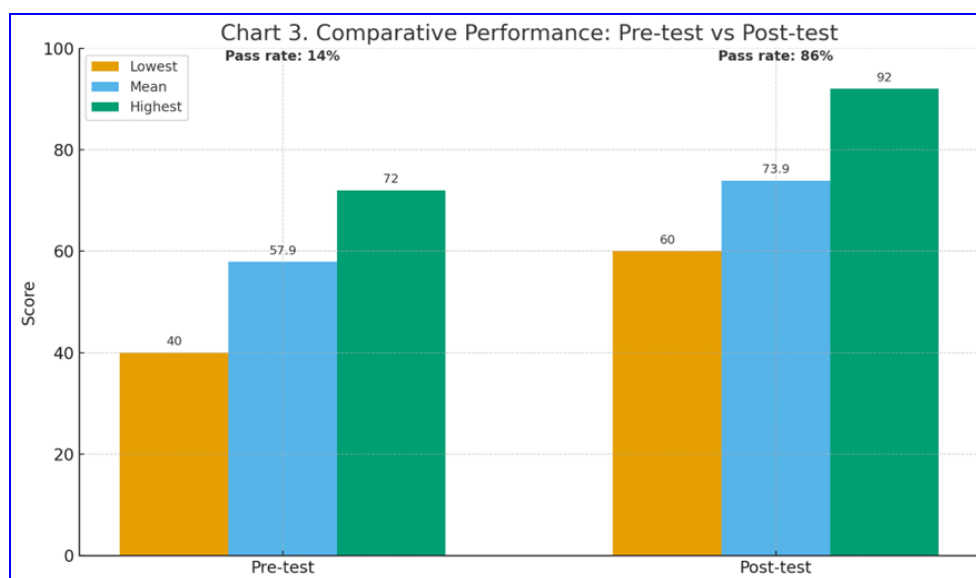


Chart 3 presents a visual comparison of pre-test and post-test results.

The figure highlights the upward trajectory in learners' vocabulary mastery, with the distribution of scores shifting from predominantly below the mastery threshold to predominantly above it. The analysis of this comparison reveals several important insights. First, the notable increase in the mean score suggests that communicative games supported not only individual learners but also lifted overall group performance. Second, the narrowing gap between low and high achievers indicates that the treatment was effective in helping weaker learners catch up, creating a more balanced achievement profile. Third, the statistical confirmation of significant improvement highlights the reliability of communicative games as a consistent method for vocabulary development.

From an interpretative perspective, the comparative results confirm that communicative games succeeded in transforming learners' vocabulary learning experience. The pre-test data reflected limited mastery and lack of retention, while the post-test demonstrated meaningful progress and stronger performance. The intervention effectively shifted the classroom dynamic from passive memorization to active engagement, where learners were motivated to recall, apply, and communicate using new vocabulary. These results validate communicative games as a practical and impactful strategy for fostering vocabulary mastery among young EFL learners.

5. Discussion

The study set out to examine whether communicative games could significantly enhance vocabulary mastery among young EFL learners at Ganesha English College, Lubuklinggau. The findings affirm the hypothesis: learners' vocabulary mastery improved considerably after the implementation of communicative games. Pre-test results reflected a low average score of 57.9, with the majority of learners

failing to meet the minimum mastery criteria. After the treatment, post-test results revealed a mean score of 73.9, with 18 of 21 learners surpassing the passing threshold. These results indicate a substantial improvement in learners' vocabulary knowledge and retention.

The improvement from pre-test to post-test demonstrates the substantial role communicative games play in fostering vocabulary acquisition. The results not only provide quantitative evidence of effectiveness but also confirm the qualitative benefits of interactive, learner-centered strategies. By raising learners' scores across the group and reducing the gap between low and high achievers, communicative games showed their capacity to engage learners of different proficiency levels equitably. This suggests that such games not only help stronger learners consolidate knowledge but also provide weaker learners with meaningful opportunities to catch up, thereby promoting inclusivity in the classroom.

The findings resonate with previous research highlighting the role of games in enhancing learner motivation, concentration, and engagement (Derakhshan & Khatir, 2015; Lorenzutti, 2016; Quispe, 2016). In particular, communicative games transform the classroom into a dynamic and participatory environment where learners are encouraged to experiment with language through embodied interaction, peer collaboration, and contextual guessing. These activities align with Schifter's (2013) observation that games capture attention and sustain motivation, and with Garris et al. (2002), who emphasized that games heighten interest and concentration. In this study, learners were not passive recipients of vocabulary lists but active participants in an experience where words were embodied, acted out, and contextualized.

Another key insight is that communicative games address several dimensions of vocabulary learning simultaneously: retention, contextual use, and learner confidence. As [Uberman \(1998\)](#) argued, games provide stress-free opportunities for learners to practice language, which helps reduce anxiety and supports risk-taking in communication. By providing diverse, playful activities, communicative games maintain novelty while reinforcing learning principles. This ensures that learners remain attentive and motivated throughout the process, avoiding the stagnation that often results from traditional rote memorization techniques.

The outcomes of this study reinforce [Alqahtani's \(2015\)](#) argument that vocabulary knowledge is central to successful communication and can be enriched through multimodal approaches incorporating sounds, gestures, expressions, and interaction. Collaborative and multimodal strategies have been widely recognized for their role in enhancing vocabulary learning and learner engagement. [Chen \(2020\)](#) emphasizes the value of collaborative learning environments in fostering communicative competencies, while [Sarmila et al. \(2023\)](#) demonstrate that visual aids improve focus on pronunciation and intonation, thereby facilitating recall in live contexts. The performance gains observed in this study indicate that vocabulary instruction should move beyond rote memorization toward fostering deeper associations that strengthen recall and application. This perspective is consistent with [Barbosa and Silva \(2020\)](#), who argue that a broad vocabulary underpins comprehension and communication, particularly as learners encounter complex texts. The narrowing achievement gap in the post-test also illustrates the equitable benefits of communicative games, supporting [Akçelik and Eyüp's \(2021\)](#) findings that interactive learning environments especially benefit less proficient learners. Moreover, the games' interactive nature encouraged collaboration and peer support, creating a positive classroom atmosphere that sustained engagement. This aligns with [Le-Thi \(2024\)](#), who highlights the strong correlation between self-regulatory strategies, enjoyment, and motivation, underscoring the role of enjoyable contexts in promoting long-term vocabulary retention.

Taken together, these findings underscore that communicative games are not merely supplementary activities but central pedagogical tools that can transform vocabulary learning. They help learners move beyond memorization, fostering contextual understanding and communicative competence. In addition, they encourage learners to develop greater confidence in using English, which is especially significant for young EFL learners who may otherwise be hesitant to participate actively in language tasks. By validating earlier studies while providing evidence from an Indonesian context, this study contributes both theoretical reinforcement and

new empirical insights to the literature on game-based language learning.

Despite its promising results, this study has limitations. The small sample size of 21 learners and the short treatment duration constrain the generalizability of the findings. The study was also conducted in a single institution, which may limit its applicability to broader contexts. Additionally, the study primarily assessed vocabulary recognition through multiple-choice tests, without exploring learners' productive vocabulary use in extended discourse or writing. These constraints highlight the need for broader, multi-site studies with larger samples and varied assessment tools.

This study highlights the novelty of communicative games as non-digital, classroom-based strategies for Indonesian young learners, showing how gesture, embodied interaction, and peer collaboration strengthen vocabulary retention and communicative competence more effectively than digital approaches. The findings provide clear evidence that such games create inclusive opportunities for learners of different proficiency levels, narrowing performance gaps and fostering equity in the classroom. For curriculum design, the results suggest that communicative games should be part of EFL instruction to enhance motivation, retention, and active vocabulary use. Future research should involve larger and more diverse populations, explore long-term effects on productive skills, and compare physical and digital games to see how each supports vocabulary learning. Investigating learners' motivation, confidence, and engagement would also offer deeper insight into their broader impact. Together, these directions show how communicative games can enrich both theory and practice in language learning.

6. Conclusions

The findings of this study highlight that communicative games significantly enhanced young EFL learners' vocabulary mastery, as evidenced by a notable increase in post-test scores compared with pre-test performance, supported by strong statistical results ($t\text{-value } 12.649 > t\text{-table } 1.724; p < 0.05$). These results confirm the effectiveness of communicative games in improving vocabulary retention, contextual application, and learner engagement beyond what traditional rote methods achieve. The key contribution of this research lies in demonstrating the pedagogical value of communicative games as non-digital, classroom-based strategies tailored to Indonesian learners, thus addressing a gap in the literature where digital games have been more commonly studied. The novelty of the study rests on showing how embodied interaction, gesture, and peer collaboration foster both vocabulary retention and communicative competence while also reducing disparities between weaker and stronger learners.

The implications extend to classroom practice, encouraging teachers to integrate communicative games into vocabulary instruction to create inclusive, motivating, and interactive learning environments, as well as to curriculum design where game-based strategies can serve as a bridge between traditional and learner-centered approaches. Given its small sample size and short treatment duration, future research is recommended to expand with larger and more diverse populations, to adopt longitudinal designs examining long-term retention, and to compare communicative games with digital or hybrid game-based approaches, thereby enriching theoretical insights and offering stronger empirical evidence for scalable implementation in EFL education.

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