

Can Board Games Enhance Students' Vocabulary Acquisition Through Narrative Texts?

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Abstract. This study aimed to enhance students' English vocabulary through the integration of narrative texts and board games in classroom instruction. Employing a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design, the research was conducted with tenth-grade students at MA Miftahul Ulum Bettet. An initial pre-test was administered to assess students' baseline vocabulary knowledge. In Cycle 1, narrative texts and board games were introduced to facilitate contextual understanding of word meanings. Cycle 2 implemented a more interactive learning approach, encouraging students to identify and comprehend vocabulary from narrative texts while actively engaging with board games. Data collection methods included vocabulary tests, vocabulary analysis, and classroom observations. The findings revealed a consistent improvement in students' vocabulary acquisition across the two cycles. Notably, there were significant gains in both vocabulary comprehension and retention. The study concludes that the combined use of narrative texts and board games constitutes an effective and engaging strategy for vocabulary development in English language learning.

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Introduction

Vocabulary is a fundamental aspect of language proficiency, serving as the foundation for effective communication in both first and second language acquisition (SLA). It encompasses the collection of words used in a language, including those referring to objects, actions, characteristics, and situations, as well as words used to construct sentences and convey ideas (Dimpleby & Burton, 2020). Beyond its basic function, vocabulary also involves the ability to understand and process both familiar and new words that emerge alongside the evolution of language (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020). Thus, vocabulary mastery is not limited to the knowledge of individual words but also includes the ability to use them appropriately in various contexts, supporting both receptive (reading and listening) and productive (speaking and writing) language skills (Rakhimova, 2024).

Vocabulary acquisition is a dynamic process influenced by exposure, practice, and context. Learners need to comprehend and produce complex language structures (Hummel, 2021). A limited vocabulary can impede communication, obscure meaning, and hinder comprehension (Eichstaedt et al., 2021). Conversely, robust vocabulary knowledge enhances critical thinking, conceptual development, and reading and writing abilities. Therefore, vocabulary acquisition is crucial for achieving language fluency and overall proficiency, especially for second-language learners (Zhang & Zhang, 2022; Volodina et al., 2020). Without adequate vocabulary, students often struggle to communicate ideas and emotions,

understand complex texts, and express arguments clearly, which in turn limits both verbal and written communication as well as critical thinking (Tathahira, 2020).

Struggles with vocabulary related to subject matter often prevent students from exploring new concepts or participating effectively in classroom discourse. This limitation leads to decreased self-confidence in peer and teacher interactions and slows academic progress (Javaid et al., 2024). Although memorization has been widely used, recent research indicates that it only aids short-term retention and fails to promote deeper understanding or contextual use of vocabulary (Anh et al., 2021). Studies by Liu & Zhang (2021) and Hassan & Ahmed (2022) emphasize the greater efficacy of active and context-based learning methods. Similarly, Li & Wang (2020) highlight that integrating technology and multimedia resources into vocabulary instruction can address common learning challenges. Consequently, there has been a growing shift toward the implementation of innovative, student-centered approaches to vocabulary instruction.

At MA Miftahul Ulum Bettet Pamekasan, vocabulary mastery in English has been identified as a significant challenge. Instructional materials predominantly consist of written texts and mechanical exercises, with limited opportunities for students to apply newly learned vocabulary in natural conversations or interactive activities. Observations during classroom instruction revealed a general lack of confidence among students when attempting to use new vocabulary. This condition can be attributed to the lack of habitual practice in recalling and applying vocabulary in meaningful, real-life contexts (Carpenter et al., 2022).

To address these challenges, an engaging learning paradigm that fosters motivation and supports vocabulary acquisition is essential. One effective method is the use of board games—interactive, collaborative, or competitive educational tools designed to teach language in an enjoyable and meaningful way. Board games can foster a stress-free environment for vocabulary use, promote word retention, and enhance semantic analysis through the grouping of related vocabulary (Gkouzioti, 2024). Furthermore, their collaborative nature facilitates interactive learning, encourages mutual understanding, and enables vocabulary practice in authentic contexts (Ningrum et al., 2024). The efficacy of board games is also supported by the intrinsic motivation they generate. When students are emotionally and cognitively engaged, their learning experiences are enriched, leading to improved vocabulary retention over the long term. These characteristics position board games as an innovative strategy for vocabulary learning, particularly in foreign or second language education (Tabassum & Naveed, 2024).

The novelty of this study lies in its exploration of the use of board games to improve English vocabulary acquisition within the context of narrative texts among tenth-grade students at MA Miftahul Ulum Bettet. Unlike previous studies that focus on rote memorization or grammar practice, this research emphasizes contextual learning through the integration of narrative stories and interactive games. Utilizing a Classroom Action Research (CAR) methodology, this study applies a cyclical approach where each phase builds upon the previous one to foster students' vocabulary understanding and retention. The incorporation of vocabulary quizzes and student-centered strategies to extract terminology from narrative texts offers a fresh pedagogical model for vocabulary learning, emphasizing meaningful engagement and active participation.

Research Method

This study employed *Classroom Action Research (CAR)* as the primary methodology to enhance students' mastery of English vocabulary and overall language proficiency. The CAR approach was selected due to its focus on reflective teaching practices, participatory learning environments, and continuous instructional improvement. The purpose of data collection was to deepen students' understanding, promote reflective pedagogy, and improve the quality of education. As highlighted by Mertler (2024), action research is widely used to address issues encountered in the classroom and broader educational settings. In this context, the CAR framework is aligned with the environment and needs of the students, particularly their engagement in meaningful learning and the development of holistic educational outcomes. According to Kemmis and Taggart in Burn (1999), CAR offers several benefits: (1) it enables systematic analysis of school or classroom events; (2) it supports actions to achieve targeted educational goals; (3) it facilitates research and evaluation of interventions for ongoing improvement; (4) it provides tools to analyze complex classroom situations both theoretically and practically; and (5) it allows for a flexible and reflective approach to enhance teaching and learning outcomes.

Participants

The study was conducted in Class X-H of MA Miftahul Ulum Bettet, involving 44 students. The research took place over two months, from October to November 2024. The initial pre-test was administered on October 7 and concluded on October 21, 2024, aligned with the school's academic calendar. Cycle 1 of the intervention was initiated on November 4, 2024, followed by preparatory stages leading into Cycle 2, ensuring that all resources and instructional designs were thoroughly in place before proceeding.

Research Design

The CAR process consisted of two cycles, each comprising four key phases: planning, action, observation, and reflection. (a) planning phase. This initial stage involved the preparation of instructional and research tools, including worksheets, board markers, curriculum guides, teaching modules, English textbooks, and observation sheets. These resources served as foundational elements to organize and structure lessons effectively (Berutu & Margana, 2023); (b) action phase. In this stage, theoretical concepts and instructional techniques were applied during classroom implementation. The core treatment involved using board games to facilitate vocabulary acquisition through contextual and interactive learning experiences. The aim was to improve student's vocabulary knowledge using active and engaging instructional strategies (Rutten, 2021); (c) observation phase. During the action implementation, classroom activities were closely monitored from start to finish. The researcher was present in all sessions to document students' learning processes and responses. Observation forms were employed to systematically record data and provide real-time insights into the pedagogical effectiveness. Furthermore, introspection was encouraged to evaluate and adjust instructional practices (Hancock et al., 2021); and (d) reflection phase. Reflection involved analyzing data gathered through observations and evaluating the instructional decisions made during each cycle. This phase emphasized determining whether the board game-based vocabulary instruction had effectively contributed to the student's learning progress. The results informed adjustments to instructional strategies for the subsequent cycle (Husband, 2020).

Data Collection and Analysis

This study utilized both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques, consistent with the principles of Classroom Action Research. Quantitative data were primarily derived from pre-tests and post-tests to measure improvements in vocabulary mastery, while qualitative data were collected through observation sheets and reflective notes. These instruments provided a rich, multidimensional understanding of student progress and the instructional effectiveness of the intervention.

Result and Discussion

Combining storytelling techniques with Neuro-Therapy (NT) has proven to be an effective way to improve vocabulary (ChePa et al., 2022). Storytelling helps learners connect new words with emotions and visuals, making it easier to remember and understand them. At the same time, Neuro-Therapy focuses on enhancing brain functions like memory and attention, which speeds up the learning process and strengthens word retention (Hsiao et al., 2024). Together, these methods create an engaging learning experience that not only helps students learn new words but also applies them naturally in everyday situations. This approach offers a practical solution for long-term vocabulary growth.

The students were given the test after the researcher used the mnemonic method in each cycle's teaching and learning procedure. The research was carried out during October and November of 2024. A preliminary test was carried out on October 7, 2024, and conference IV, which included Cycle I, resumed on Monday, October 21, 2024, at the second meeting on Monday. The sixth reunion of Cycle II took place on Monday, November 4, 2024. The four stages of classroom action research (CAR)—planning, acting, observing, and reflecting—were also included in the design of this study.

Pre-Test Stage

Before they start studying the narrative material, students are given vocabulary questions in the pre-test phase to gauge their vocabulary knowledge (Figure 1). Words that are commonly found in English texts for beginners and intermediates make up the test. The pre-test findings indicate that most students have a low degree of vocabulary competence. Their results show this, with the class average score remaining rather low. Some pupils are incapable of comprehending even simple English vocabulary.



Figure 1. Student activity at the Pre-Test Stage

Cycle 1

Cycle 1 began by giving the students a straightforward narrative text that included a number of new vocabulary words related to the subject matter being studied after determining

their starting conditions through a pre-test (Figure 2). Using narrative text and vocabulary questions is the learning technique employed in Cycle 1. It is believed that giving pupils narrative literature in Cycle 1 will enable them to identify new words in a more significant narrative setting. It is intended that by providing an engaging narrative, pupils would find it easier to retain the meaning of the terminology they encounter. In addition, pupils are taught to evaluate word meanings according to sentence context in order for them to comprehend the word's literal meaning as well as relate it to a more general meaning inside the sentence's context. In comparison to the pre-test, the Cycle 1 findings indicated a rise in scores. This gain is not very noteworthy, though, as some pupils continue to struggle to understand the meaning. The findings could be influenced by a number of factors, such as students' inability to relate vocabulary to context and their lack of experience with narrative-based learning.



Figure 2. Student activity at Cycle 1

Cycle 2

Learning strategies were enhanced in Cycle 2 to motivate students to take an active role in expanding their vocabulary (Figure 3). Similar to Cycle 1, we assigned a different narrative material to the students, but this time, they were tasked with finding new words on their own and noting what they found. Activating the student's role in the learning process is the goal of this autonomous approach. Students are supposed to be more engaged in the learning process and become more conscious of the need to expand their vocabulary by independently looking up terminology and its definition. In addition to that, this self-directed learning teaches pupils to be more cautious and critical of the texts they read. According to the results, students' vocabulary mastery increased more significantly in Cycle 2 than in Cycle 1. The graph indicates that the bars for Cycle 2 (green) are generally higher than those for Cycle 1 (orange) and the pre-test (blue), indicating that the majority of students saw a significant rise in their scores (Figure 4).



Figure 3. Student activity at Cycle 2

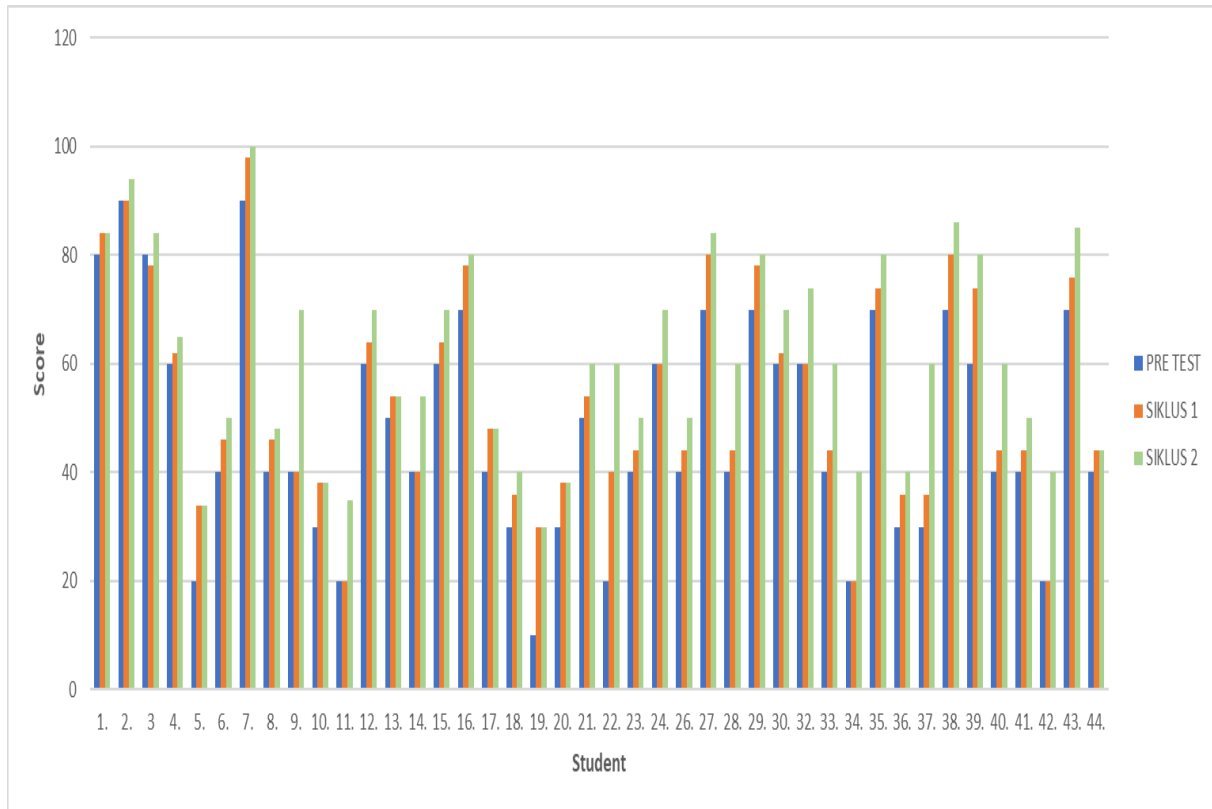


Figure 4. Graph of student scores at each stage

The comparison of student performance across the pre-test, Cycle 1, and Cycle 2 reveals a clear trajectory of improvement in vocabulary mastery among students of class X-H at MA Miftahul Ulum Bettet. While Cycle 1 produced modest gains for most students—suggesting that the use of narrative texts was beginning to influence vocabulary acquisition positively—it was Cycle 2 that demonstrated a more substantial impact. Students who initially underperformed, such as students 3 and 17, exhibited marked improvement by the end of Cycle 2, indicating that the enhanced strategies implemented—particularly those emphasizing autonomous learning—were effective in fostering deeper engagement and comprehension. Conversely, students who had already shown satisfactory performance in Cycle 1, such as students 7 and 24, continued to progress steadily, highlighting the sustained benefits of a scaffolded, iterative instructional approach.

A closer look at individual student outcomes reinforces this trend. Student 7’s achievement of the highest score in Cycle 2 underscores the responsiveness of high-performing students to differentiated instruction and the integration of reflective learning methods. However, limited progress by student 31 signals the need to address individual learning barriers such as motivation or adaptability to teaching strategies. Overall, the data suggest that beginning with narrative texts to introduce vocabulary, followed by structured autonomous learning activities, not only enhances vocabulary acquisition but also cultivates students’ active involvement in their learning journey. These findings affirm the pedagogical value of combining contextual reading materials with self-directed learning techniques to improve English language proficiency in classroom action research settings.

Comparison of Students' Score Distribution across Pre-Test, Cycle 1, and Cycle 2

A comparison of the distribution of student scores is shown in Figure 5 below.

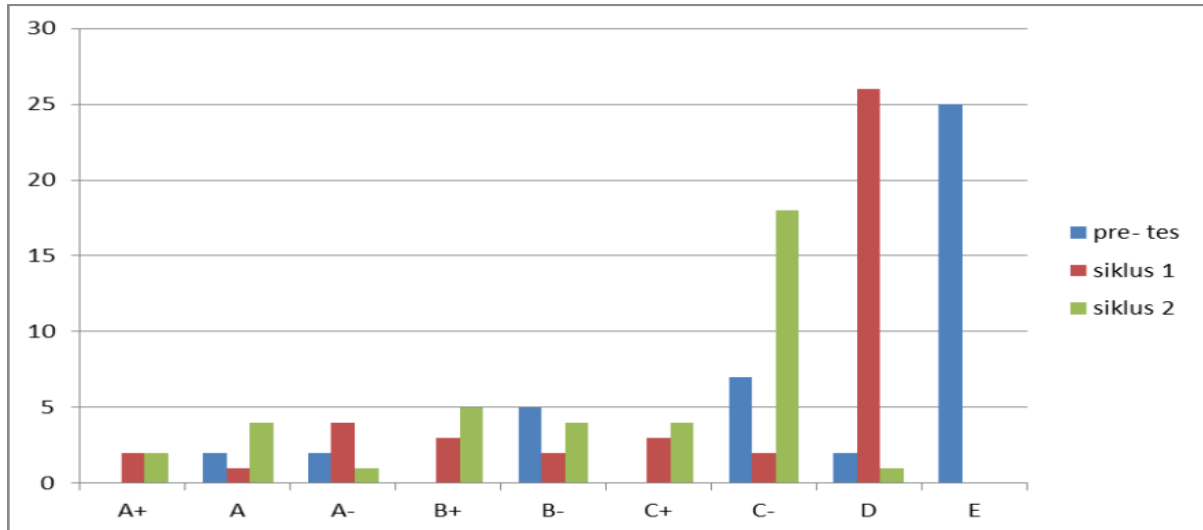


Figure 5. Distribution of student scores

The comparison of student performance across the pre-test, Cycle 1, and Cycle 2 clearly demonstrates a positive trajectory in vocabulary mastery among Class X-H students at MA Miftahul Ulum Bettet (Figure 5). Initially, the majority of students were concentrated in the lowest performance categories (Criteria D and E), indicating limited vocabulary competence. However, Cycle 1 introduced improvements, particularly in the C- to B- range, suggesting that the implementation of narrative text-based instruction began to yield moderate success. Notably, this cycle marked a reduction in the number of students in the lowest category (E), although significant gains in the top categories (A+ and A) remained limited. By Cycle 2, however, a more substantial shift was observed: the number of students in the lowest categories dropped sharply, and many transitioned to mid- and high-performing categories such as B and C+. This reflects a more robust grasp of vocabulary, attributed to autonomous learning strategies that encouraged students to explore and apply new words independently.

When disaggregated by criterion, the analysis further affirms the efficacy of this pedagogical progression. Students initially placed in Criterion A (reflecting minimal vocabulary knowledge) significantly decreased in number by Cycle 2, while those in Criteria B and C (moderate vocabulary knowledge) increased notably. The students in these groups benefited most from the combined use of narrative texts and student-centered learning approaches. More impressively, the highest categories (D and E) saw gradual yet consistent increases, indicating deeper engagement and retention of vocabulary. This pedagogical model aligns with gamification principles, especially when supplemented with board games. As evidenced by Othman & Ching (2024), and supported by Castro & Moreno (2024) and Fonseca et al. (2023), board games enhance vocabulary acquisition by promoting contextual usage, motivation through competition, and collaborative learning dynamics. Thus, integrating board games into vocabulary instruction not only augments the learning experience but also contributes to more sustained and meaningful vocabulary mastery.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate a progressive improvement in students' vocabulary mastery across the three stages: pre-test, Cycle 1, and Cycle 2. Initially, the pre-test results revealed that students had limited vocabulary knowledge, which significantly hindered their ability to comprehend English materials and communicate effectively. This underscored the need for pedagogical interventions to enhance their lexical competence. In Cycle 1, the integration of narrative texts accompanied by vocabulary-based questions led to a modest improvement in students' scores. This suggests that the use of contextualized materials such as narrative texts helped create a more engaging and meaningful learning environment, thereby facilitating better vocabulary acquisition compared to the pre-test phase. Cycle 2 demonstrated the most substantial improvement. In this phase, students were engaged in an independent learning strategy wherein they actively identified and recorded new vocabulary items from the narrative texts. This approach encouraged learners to take greater responsibility for their learning and promoted deeper cognitive processing of vocabulary. The marked increase in scores during Cycle 2 confirms the effectiveness of this student-centered strategy in significantly enhancing vocabulary mastery. Overall, the data affirm that a shift from teacher-led to student-centered learning—particularly through independent engagement with narrative texts—substantially improves students' vocabulary acquisition. These findings support the integration of active and autonomous learning strategies in vocabulary instruction to foster both engagement and long-term retention.

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