The Use of Word Association Game to Improve Students' Vocabulary Mastery in Junior High School

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Abstrak—Penelitian Tindakan Kelas ini dilakukan di SMPN 1 Kalitidu dengan melibatkan 32 siswa kelas VIII-A. Penelitian ini dilatarbelakangi oleh rendahnya nilai kosakata *adjective* (kata sifat) siswa, dengan rata-rata hanya 58,44, di bawah nilai KKM sekolah yaitu 65. Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk mengetahui penggunaan *Word Association Game* (WAG) dalam meningkatkan penguasaan kosakata siswa pada materi *adjective*. Penelitian ini dilakukan dalam satu siklus yang terdiri dari tiga pertemuan, mencakup tahap perencanaan, pelaksanaan, observasi, dan refleksi. Teknik pengumpulan data menggunakan metode kualitatif dan kuantitatif. Data kualitatif diperoleh dari lembar observasi dan wawancara, sedangkan data kuantitatif berasal dari hasil pre-test, post-test, dan angket. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan adanya peningkatan dalam penguasaan kosakata siswa, dari nilai rata-rata 58.44 pada pra-siklus menjadi 90.63 pada siklus pertama, dengan kenaikan sebesar 32.19 poin. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa penggunaan WAG memberikan dampak positif terhadap penguasaan kosakata siswa pada materi *adjective*.

Kata kunci—Permainan Asosiasi Kata, Penguasaan Kosakata, Keterlibatan Siswa

Abstract—This Classroom Action Research at SMPN 1 Kalitidu involved 32 students of class VIII-A, and this study was conducted due to low adjective vocabulary scores, with an average of 58.44, below the school's minimum passing score of 65. The purpose of this study is to determine the use of the Word Association Game (WAG) in improving students' vocabulary mastery in adjective material. The research was conducted in one cycle consisting of three meetings involving planning, action, observation, and reflection. The data collection techniques included both qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative data were obtained from observation sheets and interviews, while quantitative data were obtained from pre-tests, post-tests, and questionnaires. The results showed improvement in students' vocabulary mastery, with scores rising from 58.44 in the pre-cycle to 90.63 in cycle one, with an increase of 32.19 points. The study concludes that WAG positively impacts students' vocabulary mastery in adjective materials.

Keywords—Word Association Games, Vocabulary Mastery, Student Engagement

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is the most fundamental of the four English language skills. Students cannot master listening, speaking, reading, and writing without having a sufficient vocabulary. One of the essential components in understanding English is vocabulary, therefore, English learners must understand it. In line with Rochmadhoni et al., (2022) learning vocabulary is the first step toward making it simple for learners to understand and use English.

Having good vocabulary mastery could help learners to understand context in a sentence and convey the meaning effectively. It is supported by Nurdianingsih et.al., (2024) that stated learning English vocabulary should be designed to be engaging to young learners and teenage learners to improve their vocabulary mastery. Vocabulary mastery is not only about understanding words but also the use of words in written and spoken language. Vocabulary mastery greatly influences the effectiveness of receiving and conveying information and is considered an indicator of a person's language intelligence (Fitria, 2023). Therefore, Teachers should be able to provide diverse teaching methods to assist students in expanding their vocabulary.

Vocabulary teaching must be enhanced and reinforced because deep English comprehension is generated through good vocabulary mastery. Good vocabulary mastery can be achieved through games. Games are one way to teach vocabulary. Fatmasari et al., (2024) explained that learning English vocabulary requires more than just conveying material and having students listen to it. Teachers must involve students to be actively involved in the learning process.

Games make students more active than the teacher, and make learning fun (Andri et al., 2024). This increases motivation, reinforces vocabulary, and creates a supportive classroom atmosphere. Blake & Guillén, (2021a) also considered that games can refresh students' minds and reduce stress during vocabulary learning.

The researcher analyzed the literature and conducted a study on improving eighth graders' vocabulary mastery at SMPN 1 Kalitidu. The researcher observed several issues. These issues are that students have limited vocabulary mastery, tend to rely on provided examples rather than generating new words independently, and their vocabulary retention is still low. Teachers' teaching methods are still conventional, such as lectures and individual written tasks that are less contextual, which affects their limited vocabulary. Students engagement refers to the active role of students in learning process

According to Mellisa & Dewitt (2020), word association games are used to demonstrate spontaneous reactions to given words while also showing the participants' opinions. In practice, these words are frequently displayed on a digital screen, allowing for precise timing of each word's appearance. Sometimes students quickly mention the first response that comes to mind, while other times they are requested to write it down. The timing of the presentation of these words is changed based on the dynamics of the class and the students' reactions.

METHOD

The research method was conducted using a classroom action research approach. The study was conducted in March 2025 in the even semester of the 2024/2025 Academic Year. The participants of this study consisted of 32 students at one of the public high schools in Bojonegoro Regency, East Java. The age range of students in this study was between 13 and to 14 years. Research data were collected using observation techniques, interviews, teacher field notes, questionnaires, and tests. The researcher of this study is a researcher and an English teacher as an observer in the study. The data triangulation and methodological triangulation were used in this research to ensure the validity of the data. The criteria for the success of classroom action research in this study are 75 percent of students getting a score of 65.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Results

The researcher was done pre-interviewed the English teacher. It is found that students have difficulty learning vocabulary, especially adjectives, due to lack of practice and motivation. Although she knows that games can help, this method is rarely used.

Teachers often use memorization methods and digital media, and the teacher also encourages students to use dictionaries, but many students are reluctant to do so. In learning, the Merdeka Curriculum was used, but still finds varying levels of enthusiasm from students. The English teacher believes that this method can make vocabulary learning more interesting.

The pre-questionnaire reveal students' perspectives toward the teaching and learning process. The initial questionnaire was given to students at one of the eight grader class, with the aim of determining students' motivation and responses in learning English vocabulary. This questionnaire consists of 15 statements divided into three categories, namely students' responses in vocabulary learning, the results of vocabulary learning activities, and factors that influence vocabulary learning.

In the first category, most students (59.38%) showed a neutral attitude towards vocabulary learning, and only a small number felt happy or very happy. This shows that student involvement in the vocabulary learning process is still low. In terms of motivation, 43.75% of students felt motivated, but the same percentage showed a neutral attitude, indicating that their motivation still needs to be improved.

In the second category, some students admitted that they were able to spell words in English, but many also felt doubtful about their spelling abilities. Around 28.1% of students immediately looked up the meaning of unknown words in the dictionary, and more than half did so, even though not directly. This shows a willingness to understand vocabulary, although not yet fully optimal.

For the third category, most students felt not confident enough to ask the teacher when they did not understand the vocabulary. Some students also admitted to having difficulty remembering and using the vocabulary they had learned. Interestingly, 50% of students felt it was easier to learn vocabulary when studying in pairs or groups. Some students felt that the teacher's methods were not varied enough, and the time for vocabulary practice in class was still limited. However, the majority of students liked interactive learning methods, such as word games or quizzes. Overall, the results of the initial questionnaire showed that although some students were motivated and actively looking for vocabulary, many of them were still passive in asking questions and had difficulty remembering new vocabulary. More interesting and varied learning methods, such as games, are needed. Therefore, the researcher conducted classroom action research by implementing word association games to improve students' vocabulary mastery.

Furthermore, the pre-test was administered to 32 students of class VIII A at SMPN 1 Kalitidu. It consisted of 20 multiple-choice items focusing on English vocabulary, specifically adjectives. The results revealed that most students did not reach the Minimum Mastery Criterion (KKM), which was set at 65. Only 11 students (34.38%) scored ≥65, while the remaining 21 students (65.63%) scored below the criterion. The lowest score was 45, and the highest score was 80, with an average score of 58.44. These findings indicate that students' vocabulary proficiency, especially in adjectives, was still below expectations.

Table 1. Students' Pre-test Scores

Indicator	Results
Minimum Score	45
Maximum Score	80
Average Score	58.44
Percentage of Students ≥ 65	34.38%
Percentage of Students < 65	65.63%

Furthermore, the Classroom Action Research was conducted from March 6th to April 19th, 2025, in class VIII A of SMPN 1 Kalitidu, involving 32 students. This study applied Word Association Games to improve students' vocabulary mastery, especially in adjectives. The research consisted of one cycle with three meetings.

In the cycle one in the Planning stage there are several instruments that has prepared by the researcher. The researcher prepared lesson plans, observation checklists, teacher field notes, and post-test 1. The success criterion was set: if 75% of students scored ≥65, the research will stop in one cycle if the vocabulary score of the students' has meet the minimum passing grade.

In the acting phase, the first meeting took place on March 8th, 2025, from 07.00 to 07.55 A.M., where the teacher introduced adjectives and conducted the first Word

Association Game using relatable nouns. Students worked in small groups. The second meeting, on April 12th, 2025, from 09.40 to 11.00 A.M., involved reviewing vocabulary from the previous lesson and playing the game again with a different noun theme. The third meeting on April 19th, 2025, from 09.40 to 11.00 A.M., had all students participate by searching for adjectives in dictionaries and applying them during the game based on different contexts. The next phase is observing. Observations were made through field notes, student activity checklists, and post-test 1 results. The following presented the result of post-test 1 score.

Table 2. Students' Post-Test 1 Results

Indicator	Results
Minimum Score	60
Maximum Score	100
Average	90.63
Percentage of Students ≥ 65 (%)	96.88%
Percentage of Students < 65 (%)	3.13%

In the reflection phase, based on the reflection and discussion conducted by the researcher and the English teacher, it was found that students' vocabulary mastery had improved through the use of the Word Association Game in class VIII A of SMPN 1 Kalitidu. Observations showed that students were more engaged and better understood new vocabulary during the learning process. They also demonstrated increased ability to generate and recall vocabulary independently.

The post-test results indicated significant progress, with 96.88% of students achieving scores ≥65, surpassing the success criterion of 75%. Only one student (3.13%) did not meet the criterion, but the researcher provided motivation and reinforcement to support gradual improvement in mastering basic adjectives. Given that the success criteria were fulfilled in the first cycle, the researcher and the teacher agreed that the research could end in one cycle.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the implementation of the Word Association Game (WAG) successfully improved the vocabulary mastery of eighth-grade students at SMPN 1 Kalitidu. The students' positive responses and increased engagement during the learning process reflect the effectiveness of this method. Interviews with two English teachers before and after the implementation confirmed that WAG enhanced student interest and motivation, encouraging even passive learners to participate more actively.

The teachers observed that students became more responsive and enthusiastic, especially when the materials were connected to their daily lives. Although the method is not suitable for frequent use due to time constraints and curriculum demands, it is considered effective when applied occasionally with relevant and

engaging topics. Both teacher feedback and students' responses in the post-questionnaire highlighted that WAG made vocabulary learning more enjoyable and helped students understand synonyms, antonyms, and correct spelling more effectively. Students also reported that the game supported their ability to remember adjectives and encouraged dictionary use before the game began.

Classroom observations further supported these findings. Despite some spelling errors such as *panick*, *scaried*, and *impressife*, students were still able to identify correct forms like *colorful*, *neat*, and *lovely* in the post-test. Group collaboration during the game helped reinforce word recognition and pronunciation, which is crucial for developing receptive vocabulary skills.

The improvement was also evident in test scores. In the pre-test, only 11 out of 32 students met the minimum passing grade. After implementing WAG, 31 students passed the post-test. This significant progress demonstrates that WAG effectively supports students in understanding adjectives across different contexts and enhances their overall vocabulary mastery. Therefore, it can be concluded that the Word Association Game is a flexible and engaging strategy that positively impacts students' vocabulary learning when used appropriately.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion, it can be concluded that the Word Association Game (WAG) effectively improved the vocabulary mastery of eighth-grade students at SMPN 1 Kalitidu. This is evident from the significant increase in students' scores from pre-test to post-test, where the average score rose by 32.19 points. Initially, only 11 students met the Minimum Passing Grade, but after the implementation of WAG, 31 students successfully passed. One student who did not meet the criteria of success is given reinforcement to learn basic adjectives. Additionally, post-questionnaire data revealed a notable improvement in students' interest and motivation. Most students agreed that WAG made learning vocabulary more engaging and enjoyable. These results confirm that WAG is an effective method for enhancing students' receptive vocabulary skills.

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