Journal of English Language and Education
ISSN 2597- 6850 (Online), 2502-4132 (Print)
Journal Homepage: https://jele.or.id/index.php/jele/index

OPEN ACCESS Article

Exploring The Use Of Word Wall Gamification In Vocabulary Learning: Students' Perceptions And Engagement

https://doi.org/10.31004/jele.v10i4.1203

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A B S T R A C T

This study investigates the integration of a gamified Word Wall in vocabulary instruction and examines students' perceptions and engagement with this Word Wall. Conducted with ten students from the English Education Study Program at Universitas PGRI Delta Sidoarjo, the research employed a descriptive qualitative design. Data were gathered through observations, interviews, and field notes. The findings suggest that incorporating gamification elements such as points, challenges, and collaborative tasks enhanced students' motivation, vocabulary retention, and active participation. Students engaged actively in group and individual activities, communicated effectively, and responded positively to learning challenges. Despite these benefits, the study identified challenges including limited instructional time and varying levels of student motivation. Some participants found the activities demanding, especially when balancing academic workloads. Overall, the use of the gamified Word Wall contributed to a positive, interactive, and student-centered learning environment. The study highlights the importance of considering learners' individual differences and educational contexts to ensure the sustainability of gamified strategies. These insights offer practical implications for enhancing vocabulary learning through engaging, participatory methods.

Keywords: *Word Wall, Collaborative Learning, Vocabulary Learning, Student Perception, Student Engagement*

Article History:
Received 16th July 2025
Accepted 29th July 2025
Published 30th July 2025

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary mastery is a fundamental component of English language competence, particularly for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Without sufficient vocabulary knowledge, students struggle with reading, writing, listening comprehension, and expressing their ideas clearly in academic and everyday contexts (Sofiana & Putri, 2025). While vocabulary is essential for constructing and understanding meaningful language, acquiring it can be challenging. Many students experience difficulties due to low motivation, language anxiety, and traditional teaching methods emphasizing rote memorization. Although such methods may support short-term recall, they often result in passive learning and hinder long-term retention. Taninda (2025) noted that lacking emotional and cognitive engagement can make vocabulary acquisition less effective and harder to apply in honest communication.

The shift toward more engaging and student-centered learning strategies reflects the influence of constructivist theory, particularly the perspectives of Piaget and Vygotsky (1978). These theorists emphasize that knowledge is constructed through interaction with the environment and social context. In this view, vocabulary learning should involve meaningful engagement, peer collaboration, and tasks embedded in authentic contexts. Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is especially relevant, as it suggests that learners benefit most from tasks beyond their current level, provided with appropriate support or scaffolding such as that offered by visual tools like word walls.

One such strategy that has gained attention is the Word Wall, a classroom-based visual aid that displays essential vocabulary terms. As Indrawati (2021) notes, word walls are not merely static displays but interactive platforms where students can contribute, discuss, and manipulate vocabulary meaningfully. These interactive qualities align well with Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory, which highlights learning as a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Word walls provide students with an experiential context for using, reflecting upon, and experimenting with new vocabulary in practical settings.

Recent research further highlights the power of combining word walls with gamification elements such as points, badges, challenges, and leaderboards (Irwanto, 2025). This reflects the growing influence of gamification theory, as conceptualized by Deterding, which suggests that game-like elements in non-game contexts can boost user engagement, motivation, and performance. These mechanics promote autonomy, competence, and relatedness — the core psychological needs outlined in Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When these needs are met, students are more intrinsically motivated and willing to take risks, particularly in linguistic output tasks.

Gamification has been demonstrated to enhance students' active engagement while mitigating the anxiety frequently linked to language acquisition (Ariansyah, 2023). E.D.T. Becerra (n.d.) supports this view, suggesting that when students perceive learning as play, they are more likely to participate, persevere, and take meaningful risks in vocabulary acquisition. However, despite growing interest in digital gamified language learning (S. Becerra, 2024), limited attention has been given to in-classroom physical strategies like the Word Wall, especially in collaborative, gamified EFL contexts.

Furthermore, EFL education has yet to thoroughly explore students' perceptions of such methods. Aravind (n.d.) points out that while interactive tools may appear beneficial, understanding learners' subjective experiences remains crucial for refining instructional practices. Consequently, this study seeks to address this gap by investigating the use of word walls within EFL vocabulary acquisition and examining learners' perspectives on their efficacy. This exploration is grounded in contemporary motivational, cognitive, and constructivist frameworks, highlighting the potential of interactive, gamified learning environments to enhance vocabulary development.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to investigate the implementation of a gamification-based Word Wall in supporting vocabulary learning. This method enabled an in-depth exploration of students' cognitive and affective responses during the learning process. It was appropriate for capturing how learners construct meaning, engage emotionally, and participate cognitively in gamified vocabulary activities. As Creswell and Poth (2018) note, qualitative research is particularly effective in examining participants' emotional involvement, social interactions, and learning behaviors beyond what numerical or statistical data can reveal.

Subjects

The subjects of this research were ten students from the English Education Study Program, batch 2023, at Universitas PGRI Delta Sidoarjo. The participants comprised six male and four female students from class PBI 2023C, all enrolled in the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka (MBKM) program. These students were purposively selected based on their active participation in the learning activities conducted during the study. Instructional sessions were held every Tuesday from 18:30 to 20:00 WIB throughout two meetings. The learning sessions were facilitated by an English lecturer who applied collaborative gamification strategies, with the Word Wall serving as the primary interactive medium for vocabulary development.

Procedures

The research procedure involved implementing gamified vocabulary learning activities to promote interactive and collaborative learning. These activities included Word

Wall games, group vocabulary competitions, and the supplementary use of digital media such as flashcards and educational videos. The activities aimed to create meaningful learning contexts, enhance student motivation, and support vocabulary retention. The researcher took an active role in observing and documenting classroom interactions to ensure the collection of authentic data. All classroom events, student interactions, and relevant activities were systematically recorded to ensure data validity and reliability.

Three Primary Data Collection Instruments Were Employed

(1) Observation Sheets to record classroom activities, implementation of gamification strategies, and students' engagement levels during vocabulary learning. (2) Semi-structured Interviews – conducted with four randomly selected students to explore their perceptions, motivations, and challenges during the gamified learning process. (3) Field Notes – detailed records maintained by the researcher to capture spontaneous student reactions, contextual dynamics, and significant events throughout the sessions.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data from observations, interviews, and field notes were analyzed using thematic analysis. This involved coding, categorizing, and identifying emerging themes related to vocabulary retention, student engagement, and emotional responses to gamification-based learning. The study was guided by theories on learning, motivation, and experiential learning to interpret the impact and effectiveness of the gamified Word Wall strategy in enhancing vocabulary acquisition.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study explored implementing a gamified Word Wall strategy in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) vocabulary instruction to assess student engagement and perceptions. The findings were from classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with students participating in the gamified learning activities. Results indicate a generally positive impact on learners' motivation, interaction, and collaborative behavior, though some challenges were also identified. The analysis is organized around seven core indicators observed during instruction.

Findings

From the observation, it is found that all students focus on the activities. And each student learned the material in groups and on their own. They communicate well and help each other. Even the students are active in the learning activities.

Based on the interview result, nine students are enthusiastic during the learning process, and the word wall application enhances learning motivation through point point-level system. On the other hand, many students have difficulties, especially when the application word wall runs in audio.

Discussion

Vocabulary Retention

All ten students observed maintained sustained attention throughout the gamified Word Wall activities. This heightened focus is attributed to integrating game elements such as points, levels, and leaderboards, which captured learners' interest. As highlighted by Respondent 2 in the interviews, these mechanics introduced an element of playfulness that made the learning process more engaging. This aligns with Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) posits that when learners' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are met, their intrinsic motivation—and consequently, their attentional control—increases significantly.

Student Engagement

Seven students demonstrated active participation in both individual and collaborative learning tasks. The structure of the gamified Word Wall enabled them to take responsibility for personal vocabulary acquisition while working collaboratively to complete group challenges. Respondent 1, who also holds a part-time job, emphasized that the level-based system allowed more efficient time management and self-paced learning. This dual engagement reflects the principles of Constructivist Learning Theory (Piaget; Vygotsky, 1889

), which views knowledge construction as a social and individual endeavor, shaped through meaningful interactions and scaffolded learning within the learner's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

Observation data revealed that nine students actively supported their peers during group tasks. Interview findings reinforced this, as students reported feeling encouraged to collaborate due to the competitive yet cooperative nature of the gamification design. According to Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, learning is inherently social, and progress is optimized when learners engage in shared tasks with peers who provide support within their ZPD. The Word Wall activities offered ample opportunities for shared problem-solving and peer-to-peer scaffolding.

Nine students completed all assigned vocabulary challenges, indicating that the gamified system promoted persistence and task completion. However, the interviews also surfaced constraints. Respondent 1 acknowledged that competing academic and work responsibilities made it difficult to engage consistently. Respondent 2 suggested that gamification, while initially motivating, may not sustain learner engagement if intrinsic interest in language learning is lacking. These insights further nuance Self-Determination Theory, emphasizing that extrinsic motivators (e.g., points or badges) must be integrated with strategies that cultivate enduring intrinsic motivation and personal relevance to achieve sustainable engagement.

Emotional Responses to Gamification-Based Learning

Nine students communicated effectively during learning tasks, suggesting that the gamified activities promoted vocabulary recognition and active language use. While not directly addressed in the interviews, the overall high level of interaction observed aligns with students' increased participation and motivation. These behaviors can be interpreted through Kolb's (1999)Experiential Learning Theory, which emphasizes learning as a process grounded in direct experience, reflective observation, and interactive experimentation—processes that often require verbal negotiation and peer collaboration.

Eight students demonstrated high interactivity by asking questions, offering suggestions, and engaging deeply with vocabulary tasks. Both respondents described the gamified Word Wall as enjoyable and stimulating, indicating that play-based learning mechanisms helped foster a more dynamic classroom environment. This supports Gamification Theory (Deterding et al., 2011), which contends that using game elements in non-game contexts enhances learner engagement and promotes active participation, particularly when tasks include clear goals and immediate feedback.

Nine students expressed enthusiasm during the instructional sessions. According to Respondent 1, the gamification elements transformed vocabulary learning into a playful experience that was more enjoyable than traditional methods, making it easier to allocate time for study. This finding reinforces Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle, in which emotional involvement through concrete experiences strengthens cognitive processing and reflection. When framed as a game-like task, the Word Wall's emotional appeal contributed to more meaningful and memorable learning experiences.

The Implementation of Gamification

The gamification-based vocabulary sessions were conducted over two 60-minute meetings with ten students (six males and four females) from Universitas PGRI Delta Sidoarjo. Each session began with introducing vocabulary materials using visual media projected via LCD. Students also listened to native speakers to improve pronunciation.

The core activity featured a Word Wall, in which students matched vocabulary with corresponding images projected on the classroom wall. Tasks were completed individually and in groups to ensure broad participation. The gamification design incorporated point systems, tiered challenges, and visual progress tracking to stimulate healthy competition and sustain engagement. Student responses and learning outcomes were evaluated through direct observation and semi-structured interviews, focusing on key elements such as motivation, interaction, and vocabulary acquisition.

Students' Perceptions and Experiences Regarding the Use of Gamified Word Wall for Vocabulary Learning

This study examined how gamified Word Wall strategies influence vocabulary acquisition in EFL classrooms by analyzing observational data, student interviews, and field notes through thematic analysis. Three major themes emerged from the data: (1) enhanced motivation and engagement, (2) meaningful interaction and collaboration, and (3) constraints to sustained participation. These findings are discussed about established theoretical frameworks and prior empirical research in language education and human learning.

One of the most prominent themes from the data is the significant increase in learner motivation and engagement. Classroom observations revealed that most students remained attentive and enthusiastic throughout the learning process, and interview responses consistently cited game-like elements—points, levels, time-based challenges, and visualized progress—as powerful motivators. This aligns with Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which posits that gamified systems can increase intrinsic motivation when they satisfy learners' psychological needs: competence, autonomy, and relatedness.

Students who had previously disengaged from conventional learning methods became more willing to participate, a shift that corresponds with findings from Munir et al. (2021) and Surjono & Priyanto (2022), both of whom observed similar transformations among passive learners in gamified language classrooms. Panmei & Waluyo (2023) reported that incorporating game mechanics into vocabulary instruction significantly boosted cognitive and affective engagement, mainly when supported by multimodal elements like visuals and native speaker audio components reflected in the Word Wall used in this study.

Gamified Word Wall strategies also facilitated collaborative and socially mediated learning. Most students worked actively in groups, shared knowledge, and demonstrated peer support during vocabulary challenges. These findings strongly support the Constructivist paradigm (Piaget, Vygotsky), particularly Vygotsky's (1978) notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which emphasizes learning through guided interaction just beyond the learner's current level of competence.

In addition, the design of the Word Wall provided opportunities for active involvement consistent with Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984). Students contributed vocabulary items, reflected on usage, and experimented with language through concrete and context-rich experiences. These activities align with the experiential learning cycle: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.

Field notes indicated that students frequently used new vocabulary in context during gamified tasks, including competitive challenges and peer-based games. This informal yet purposeful use of language promotes deeper cognitive processing and more durable retention, consistent with the principles of applied vocabulary acquisition. Deterding et al. (2011) explain that gameful learning environments support risk-taking and active knowledge construction, both evident in the classroom.

These observations are further supported by Ariansyah (2023), who found that gamification helps reduce language anxiety and encourages learners to take linguistic risks. This study's playful, low-stakes nature of the Word Wall activities appears to have created an emotionally safe and motivating context for vocabulary use and development.

Despite these benefits, data also revealed challenges to maintaining consistent engagement. While gamification initially stimulated motivation, some students noted that motivation was not always sustainable without intrinsic interest in the subject matter. For example, vocabulary topics perceived as irrelevant led to reduced focus, even when gamified elements were present. This finding reinforces a critical point in Self-Determination Theory: external rewards can drive short-term behavior, but intrinsic interest must be cultivated for long-term engagement.

Additionally, both interview and observational data showed that time constraints, academic overload, and external obligations (e.g., part-time jobs) limited some students' ability to engage fully. These findings align with Marin-Pacurucu & Argudo-Garzón (2020), who emphasize that contextual barriers such as time pressure can affect the effectiveness of

gamified learning. As Kolb (1984) notes, experiential learning requires not just activity, but time for reflection and consolidation—resources not always available to all learners.

The integration of gamified Word Wall activities demonstrates significant potential for enriching vocabulary instruction in EFL contexts. This study shows that such strategies support a more engaging, student-centered, and psychologically supportive environment that enhances lexical knowledge while fostering confidence and communication skills. Moreover, the method aligns with humanistic approaches to language education, emphasizing the learner's emotional, cognitive, and social development.

However, the effectiveness of gamification depends on careful instructional design. Teachers must ensure that competitive elements do not overshadow collaboration or exclude learners struggling to keep pace. Instead, flexible design, differentiation, and inclusive participation should be prioritized. When combined with student voice and autonomy, gamified Word Wall strategies can become powerful tools for equitable and meaningful language instruction.

The findings of this study support the initial assumption that gamification enhances engagement and vocabulary retention in EFL classrooms, which is consistent with the broader literature. Studies by Ibáñez & Delgado-Kloos (2018) and Irwanto (2025) found that gamified vocabulary instruction improves learner motivation and achievement. Panmei & Waluyo (2023) noted that platforms like Quizizz make vocabulary practice more game-like and self-directed. Li (2021) found that game-based vocabulary tools enhance learners' confidence and learning outcomes.

However, unlike these primarily digital interventions, this research highlights the effectiveness of non-digital, classroom-based tools like the Word Wall. When enhanced with multimodal support (e.g., visual design, auditory cues, kinaesthetic interaction), low-tech tools can foster comparable motivation and retention levels. This suggests that pedagogical creativity and meaningful task design are more crucial than technological sophistication in determining the success of gamified instruction.

In conclusion, gamified Word Wall instruction is an effective medium for enhancing vocabulary learning in EFL contexts. It promotes cognitive and emotional engagement, fosters peer collaboration, and supports deeper vocabulary retention through experiential and playful learning. When thoughtfully implemented, this strategy aligns well with foundational theories in human knowledge, constructivism, experiential learning, gamification, and motivational psychology.

Nevertheless, sustaining its effectiveness requires attention to individual learner contexts, including workload, motivation, and access. To ensure long-term success, gamified vocabulary instruction must be embedded within a flexible, inclusive, and student-centered framework that values performance and process. Teachers should balance structure, freedom, competition, cooperation, novelty, and sustainability to optimize learner outcomes.

CONCLUSIONS

This study confirmed the effectiveness of collaborative gamification, specifically the use of the Word Wall, enhancing vocabulary learning within a student-centered framework. The findings demonstrate that this strategy promotes active engagement, intrinsic motivation, and cooperative learning, essential for vocabulary acquisition. These outcomes align with constructivist and experiential learning theories that highlight the importance of contextual, interactive, and learner-driven educational experiences. From a practical perspective, the Word Wall provides language teachers with a low-tech yet impactful approach to designing interactive and engaging vocabulary lessons. The study shows that such strategies can enrich classroom dynamics and support deeper learning when implemented thoughtfully. Nonetheless, the research also identified challenges, including the need for facilitation that accommodates varied learner abilities and external constraints such as time and academic workload. These factors should be carefully considered in future applications to ensure sustained participation and equitable learning outcomes. In conclusion, the Word Wall-based

gamification approach offers promising pedagogical potential for EFL vocabulary instruction, particularly when integrated into a flexible, student-responsive learning environment.

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