


TEACHING VOCABULARY THROUGH PLAY: THE CIRCLE GAME IN AN
INDONESIAN CLASSROOM

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Article history: Received: June 4, 2025 Revised: June 5, 2025 Accepted: August 7, 2025 Published: August 31, 2025</p> <p>Keywords: Vocabulary Mastery Circle Game Teaching Strategy EFL Classroom Game-based Learning</p>	<p>Vocabulary acquisition remains a persistent challenge in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, particularly in relation to spelling accuracy, word meaning, and contextual usage. Addressing this issue, the present study investigates the effectiveness of the Circle Game as an interactive teaching strategy aimed at improving vocabulary mastery among eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 1 Sindue Tobata. Employing a quasi-experimental design, 50 students were divided into control and experimental groups. The experimental group engaged in six Circle Game sessions, while the control group received traditional instruction. Data were collected through pre- and post-tests. Results indicated a notable increase in the vocabulary scores of the experimental group, rising from a mean score of 55.36 to 86.8, compared to the control group's improvement from 60.4 to 68.4. A t-test analysis confirmed the statistical significance of the difference between the two groups ($t = 7.56 > 2.011$). This study highlights the urgency of adopting engaging, student-centered methods in EFL instruction. The findings suggest that game-based strategies like the Circle Game can significantly boost vocabulary learning, motivation, and classroom interaction.</p> <p><i>This is an open access article under the CC BY-SA license.</i></p> <div></div>
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INTRODUCTION

The Vocabulary plays a crucial role in supporting the development of the four primary language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Without an adequate vocabulary, students will face significant challenges in expressing ideas and understanding others. Vocabulary is widely recognized as a central component of language proficiency, serving as a bridge between comprehension and production. As noted by Nation (2015), an extensive vocabulary is essential for learners to effectively process and produce language in real-world

contexts. In the context of Indonesian education, particularly under the 2013 Curriculum (Kurikulum 2013), vocabulary is not taught explicitly but is integrated within broader skills, often limiting direct instruction and practice.

Despite this integrated approach, many students, especially in rural or under-resourced areas, still struggle with mastering basic vocabulary. Preliminary observation at SMP Negeri 1 Sindue Tobata revealed that students face consistent difficulties in spelling words (form), understanding their meaning (semantic comprehension), and using them appropriately in sentences (use). These challenges hinder their overall ability to perform in English and suggest that conventional teaching strategies may not be effectively addressing vocabulary acquisition.

To tackle this issue, educators are encouraged to implement more interactive and engaging methods in teaching vocabulary. One such method is the Circle Game, a game-based instructional strategy that involves active participation and contextual application of words. The Circle Game encourages students to work collaboratively and apply vocabulary in real-time oral interaction, promoting both retention and fluency. Previous studies (e.g., Aeni et al., 2019; Nisa' & Fatmawaty, 2018) have shown that game-based learning enhances vocabulary mastery and motivates learners through enjoyable, low-pressure environments.

However, most existing studies employ fixed procedures and do not adapt the game structure to specific classroom needs. This study seeks to address this gap by proposing an adapted version of the Circle Game tailored to the learning context of eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 1 Sindue Tobata. The research focuses on evaluating vocabulary improvement through three components: form, meaning, and use. The innovation lies in customizing the Circle Game procedures to align with the vocabulary level and communicative needs of the students.

Therefore, this research aims to examine the effectiveness of the Circle Game as an interactive teaching strategy in enhancing students' vocabulary mastery. It provides empirical data on the impact of the method and contributes to the growing body of research on game-based language instruction in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a quasi-experimental design using a nonequivalent control group pre-test and post-test structure. The design was chosen to compare the vocabulary mastery improvement between an experimental group and a control group under different instructional treatments. According to Sugiyono (2017), quasi-experimental designs are appropriate when random assignment is not possible but a comparison between groups is still needed to measure the treatment effect.

The population of this study comprised all eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 1 Sindue Tobata, totaling 50 students across two classes. Class VIII A was assigned as the experimental group, while Class VIII B served as the control group. The sampling technique used was random sampling, based on the similar baseline characteristics and vocabulary difficulties observed in both classes.

The research procedure began with the administration of a pre-test to both groups. The test measured three aspects of vocabulary mastery: form (spelling), meaning (matching), and use (sentence construction). The experimental group received the treatment using the Circle Game strategy for six sessions, while the control group was taught using conventional methods. After the instructional period, a post-test was administered to both groups using the same test structure.

The data collection instrument was a vocabulary test consisting of 30 items: 10 items for sentence construction, 10 for word matching, and 10 for spelling. Each correct item was scored, with a maximum total score of 50. The scoring rubric was adapted from the Kurikulum 2013 (K13) assessment standards.

To analyze the data, this study applied descriptive and inferential statistics. Individual scores were first calculated, followed by mean scores for each group. The t-test formula, as proposed by Arikunto (2006), was used to determine the significance of the difference between pre-test and post-test scores in both groups. Additional calculations included deviation scores and sum of square deviations to support the t-value computation. This approach ensured a scientifically valid evaluation of the treatment effect.

The chronological steps of this research—starting from the problem identification, instrument design, pre-test administration, treatment implementation, post-test, and data analysis—were carried out in line with best practices in educational experimental research, providing reliable insight into the effectiveness of the Circle Game in enhancing vocabulary mastery.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of the pre-test and post-test conducted with both the experimental and control groups. It also provides a comprehensive discussion of the findings and evaluates the effectiveness of the Circle Game in improving students' vocabulary mastery.

Findings

The findings from the pre-test indicate that the students in both groups started with relatively low vocabulary mastery. The experimental group had a mean score of 55.36, while the control group's average was 60.4. None of the students in the experimental group reached the minimum mastery level (KKM), and only a few in the control group did. This shows that both groups were relatively equal in their initial abilities.

After the implementation of the Circle Game over six meetings, the post-test results showed a significant improvement in the experimental group, with a mean score of 86.8. In comparison, the control group improved only modestly to 68.4. This difference of over 18 points illustrates that the interactive and contextual learning model had a strong impact on vocabulary acquisition. These results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of Pre-test and Post-test Scores

Group	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean
Experimental	55.36	86.8
Control	60.4	68.4

The difference suggests that the Circle Game significantly contributed to vocabulary improvement. This highlights the positive effect of the Circle Game as an engaging and effective learning strategy. Students in the experimental group showed improved ability to construct sentences, recognize meanings, and spell words accurately.

The Result of Post-test

The post-test was designed to evaluate the progress in vocabulary mastery after the treatment. It maintained the same structure as the pre-test, covering aspects of form (spelling), meaning (matching words to definitions), and use (making sentences). The results show that all students (100%) in the experimental group met or exceeded the minimum score (KKM = 72), while only 22 out of 25 students (88%) in the control group reached the same benchmark.

This achievement supports the assumption that vocabulary mastery improves when students are provided with opportunities to practice vocabulary in meaningful, repetitive, and social contexts, such as those created by game-based learning strategies like the Circle Game.

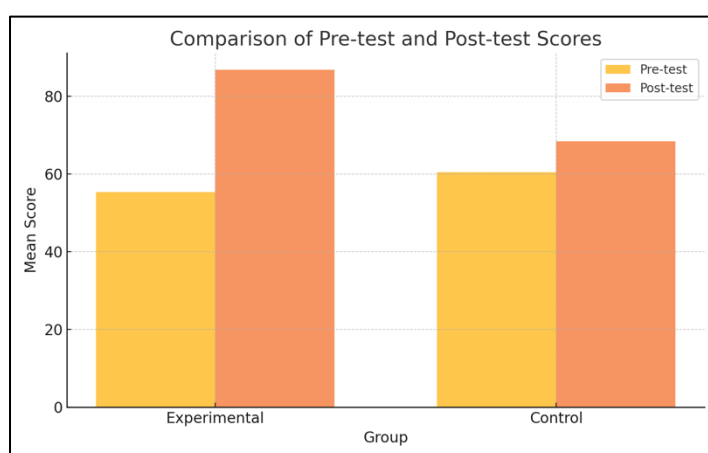


Fig 1. Score Comparison Between Pre-test and Post-test

The chart in Fig. 1 shows that the experimental group's mean score increased significantly from pre-test to post-test (around 55 to 87), while the control group's improvement was smaller (around 60 to 68). This indicates that the Circle Game had a stronger effect on vocabulary mastery compared to traditional teaching methods.

Deviation and Statistical Analysis

To statistically validate the effect of the Circle Game, mean deviations between pre-test and post-test scores were calculated. The experimental group had a mean deviation of 30.96, significantly higher than the control group's 7.28. Furthermore, the total square deviation for the experimental group was 25,228, compared to 3,652 in the control group.

The t-test was applied using the formula by Arikunto (2006) to determine the significance of the score differences.

From the computation:

- $t\text{-counted} = 7.56$
- $t\text{-table} (df = 48, \alpha = 0.05) = 2.011$

Since the value of $t\text{-counted}$ exceeds the $t\text{-table}$, the null hypothesis is rejected. This confirms that the observed improvement in the experimental group is statistically significant and not due to chance.

Table 2. Summary of Statistical Results

Group	Mean Deviation	Total Square Deviation	$t\text{-counted}$
Experimental	30.96	25,228	7.56
Control	7.28	3,652	—

Discussion

The findings of this research are in line with previous studies (Aeni et al., 2019; Nisa' & Fatmawaty, 2018; Triassanti & Baihaqi, 2017), which all show that the Circle Game is effective in improving vocabulary learning. However, the present study contributes a new perspective by modifying the procedure to fit the specific needs of students at SMP Negeri 1 Sindue Tobata.

From the observed results, the Circle Game facilitated:

- Reinforcement of Form: Students improved their spelling accuracy through repeated and engaging oral practice.
- Clarification of Meaning: The interaction among peers and teacher feedback helped students understand and remember word meanings more effectively.
- Application in Use: Students were encouraged to construct meaningful sentences, which allowed them to activate passive vocabulary into usable knowledge.

This outcome aligns with current research, which emphasizes that repeated and contextualized exposure to vocabulary is critical for long-term retention (Nation, 2015; Webb & Nation, 2017). Such reinforcement across meaningful contexts strengthens the bridge between comprehension and production and promotes durable vocabulary knowledge. Moreover, Çelik & Aydin (2019) and Wright et al. (2005) found that games lower learning anxiety and promote risk-taking in language use, conditions which were observed during classroom implementation.

Reflection on Implementation

Despite the success, several challenges arose during implementation. Initially, some students were hesitant to participate in the game due to fear of making mistakes in front of peers. However, as sessions progressed, peer support and teacher scaffolding helped alleviate this anxiety. By the third meeting, students were noticeably more confident and eager to take turns.

The teacher's role in preparing appropriate vocabulary lists and modeling the use of words in sentences was crucial. The game itself was flexible and adaptable, allowing students at different proficiency levels to engage meaningfully.

Overall, the Circle Game provided a structured yet dynamic framework for vocabulary instruction. Its combination of movement, fun, and academic challenge created a balanced learning experience that supported both affective and cognitive language development.

CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to determine whether the Circle Game could serve as an effective strategy to improve vocabulary mastery among eighth-grade students. As stated in the Introduction, the goal was to help students overcome difficulties in spelling, understanding word meaning, and using vocabulary in context. The findings confirmed that the Circle Game significantly enhanced students' vocabulary performance, fulfilling the initial expectation of this research.

The results showed a remarkable increase in the post-test scores of the experimental group, who received treatment using the Circle Game, compared to the control group taught through conventional methods. Students became more confident in constructing sentences, recognizing vocabulary accurately, and applying it in meaningful contexts. The statistical analysis supported this improvement, indicating that the method had a real and measurable impact on students' language learning outcomes.

In conclusion, the Circle Game proved to be not only enjoyable but also pedagogically valuable in supporting vocabulary development. It can be considered a practical alternative for English teachers seeking to increase student engagement and retention. For future studies, this strategy could be applied to other language components or adapted into digital formats to broaden its application and further enhance its effectiveness across varied learning environments.

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