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Stimulating Motivational Engagement in Vocabulary Learning: Evidence From the Word Tail Game in an EFL Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary learning is an essential component of English language development, yet many students continue to face difficulties in achieving progress and maintaining motivation. This study aimed to examine the effect of the Word Tail Game on students' vocabulary achievement and learning motivation. A mixed method approach with a convergent parallel design was employed. Quantitative data were used to measure students' achievement, and qualitative interview data were used to explore their motivation. The participants consisted of 20 second-grade junior high school students. The findings show a significant increase in post-test scores, indicating an improvement in vocabulary achievement. Qualitative results also reveal that indicators of motivated learning behavior appeared consistently during the game, supported by students' positive responses. These findings suggest that the Word Tail Game can enhance engagement and support vocabulary learning. The study contributes empirical evidence to the growing body of research on game-based learning in EFL contexts.

Keywords: *efl learners, game-based learning, motivation, vocabulary achievement, word tail game*

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is essential for effective communication (Blair et al., 2024), yet English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners often struggle due to limited daily exposure (Zhu & Huang, 2021). Furthermore, many students find vocabulary building tedious, leading to low motivation (Arefinezhad & Golaghaei, 2014). This presents a significant barrier, as high motivation is strongly correlated with superior learning outcomes (Masland, 2021; Purmadhani et al., 2024). As Schunk et al. (2014), noted, motivation directs *what*, *when*, and *how* students learn, meaning a motivated student will exhibit greater comprehension, whereas an unmotivated student is unlikely to engage meaningfully with instructional content (Adem & Deneke, 2024). However, despite the recognized importance

of vocabulary for EFL learners, many students still struggle to expand their vocabulary due to limited exposure, low motivation, and monotonous instructional practices.

Motivation is broadly categorized into two main types: intrinsic and extrinsic (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Intrinsic motivation refers to engaging in an activity for its inherent satisfaction, interest, and enjoyment (Moreno, 2022). Intrinsically motivated behaviours are driven by internal rewards, such as a sense of discovery or personal fulfilment, rather than external pressures (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Students with strong intrinsic motivation might participate in an activity because it is fun, creatively stimulating, or aligns with their personal values (Longakit et al., 2025). This internal drive is a powerful predictor of academic performance, with a meta-analysis by Taylor et al. (2014), confirming its strong correlation with higher achievement. Conversely, extrinsic motivation is driven by the desire to attain a separate outcome, such as earning rewards, receiving praise, or avoiding punishment (Serin, 2018; Wang & Guthrie, 2004). An extrinsically motivated student may be driven by the desire for good grades, recognition, or the fear of negative consequences (Hendry et al., 2025; Weiser, 2014).

Gamified approaches like the word tail game are particularly well-suited to meet these needs. The game fosters a sense of autonomy by allowing students to choose their own words within the given constraints, offering a degree of control over their participation. It enhances feelings of competence as students successfully recall and contribute words, receiving immediate, positive reinforcement from their progress in the game. Finally, its interactive and collaborative nature directly supports the need for relatedness, building a positive social atmosphere and a sense of community among peers (Yi et al., 2024). By nurturing these three needs, such activities can shift motivation from being purely extrinsic to being more internal and self-determined.

Beyond these psychological benefits, the mechanics of the word tail game also promote critical cognitive processes essential for vocabulary learning. The game requires rapid lexical access, forcing students to actively retrieve words from their mental lexicon rather than passively recognizing them from a list (Davis, 2024). This process of active recall is known to strengthen memory traces far more effectively than simple review. Furthermore, the game encourages phonological awareness and orthographic mapping as students must focus on the initial and final sounds and letters of words. This reduced-anxiety environment aligns with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, which states that learners acquire language more effectively when emotional barriers such as fear or embarrassment are lowered (Krashen, 1982; Lin et al., 2023). In this low-

anxiety state, students are more receptive to learning and more willing to take linguistic risks (Sugiarti, 2020).

Several factors can lead to a lack of student motivation. (Sugiarti, 2020) identifies several causes, including excessive task difficulty, unrealistically high teacher expectations, and unengaging instructional methods. Furthermore, a student's motivation can be diminished by a perceived lack of appreciation from the teacher, low self-confidence, or a poor student-teacher rapport (Tanaka, 2022). In vocabulary learning, traditional approaches that rely on rote memorization of word lists often induce boredom and disengagement, thereby suppressing student motivation (Jones et al., 2025). To counteract this motivational deficit, educators must implement engaging strategies that foster a positive learning environment. The integration of game mechanics into non-game contexts, has emerged as a highly effective pedagogical tool for increasing student engagement and motivation (Nguyen, 2025; Park & Kim, 2022). The word tail game creates a dynamic and socially competitive atmosphere that encourages active participation and situates vocabulary learning within a meaningful and enjoyable context (Baker, 2025; Y. D. Permatasari, 2019).

Few studies have specifically investigated the direct effect of the word tail game as a targeted intervention for improving student motivation in vocabulary learning. Previous research has affirmed the benefits of using games in language education. For instance, studies by Suryani (2020) and Permatasari (2024), found that word games significantly improved students' vocabulary mastery. Similarly, Sari and Sudarsono (2021) concluded that word search games enhanced vocabulary retention. Other studies have shown that strategies such as using ICT media and games can boost extrinsic motivation (Sugiarti, 2020), while blended learning approaches positively impact both achievement and motivation (Oweis, 2018). While this body of literature confirms that games improve vocabulary scores and that various strategies can influence motivation, a research gap remains.

Although previous studies have shown that games can enhance vocabulary mastery and increase student engagement, very few have examined how a specific verbal game such as the Word Tail Game influences both vocabulary achievement and learning motivation simultaneously. Existing research tends to focus only on vocabulary outcomes or general gamification strategies, leaving a gap in understanding how this particular game supports motivational development during vocabulary learning.

This study aims to examine the effect of the Word Tail Game on students' vocabulary achievement and learning motivation, providing empirical evidence for a practical classroom strategy that can enhance both cognitive and affective

learning outcomes. By examining both the extent and nature of the motivational impact, the findings could offer practical insights for educators and curriculum designers seeking to create more dynamic and engaging language learning environments.

METHOD

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-method design, in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed independently and then merged during interpretation. This design was chosen because the research aimed to measure the effectiveness of the Word Tail Game on vocabulary achievement (quantitative) while simultaneously exploring students' motivation and perceptions of the game (qualitative). A convergent approach allows both types of data to complement each other and provide a more comprehensive understanding of how the game influences cognitive and affective learning outcomes. Denzin & Lincoln (2011), as mentioned in Kusumastuti & Khoiron (2019) stated that qualitative research is very important to find out the motive of someone's action or behavior that need to explain deeply. Furthermore, to measure the students' achievement, it was interpreted by using numerical data. In this case, the researcher used quantitative approach.

The sample consisted of 20 junior high school students, located in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. The class was selected using cluster random sampling, in which intact classroom groups are randomly chosen as the study sample (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Although the class originally consisted of 32 students, only 20 students completed all sessions, including the pre-test, treatments, and post-test; therefore, only these students' data were included in the analysis. All participants were aged between 13 and 14 years old. The study followed standard ethical procedures, including informed consent from the school, teacher approval, and assurances of anonymity and confidentiality for all student responses.

In this research, the researcher chose to use pre and post-test, it was done in two meetings. This instrument is aimed to find out the students' vocabulary achievement after learning by using word tail game. The pre-test was given before the researcher applied the game to the students' observation. The pre-test was given in the beginning of the research process. The test was consisted of three parts. While, the post-test was carried out after the students learned vocabulary by using the game. The type of this test was the same with the pre-test, it was different for some questions but basically the type was still the same.

The vocabulary test consisted of 30 items covering word recognition, word meaning, and word use in context. To ensure reliability, the test was piloted to a group of students with similar characteristics, resulting in a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82, indicating high internal consistency. Content validity was established through expert judgment from two English lecturers, who reviewed the items for clarity, relevance, and alignment with the curriculum.

The researcher compared the results of the pre-test and post-test to determine the effect of the game on students' vocabulary achievement. The second instrument was direct observation, which was conducted over four meetings. It was carried out in the classroom while the researcher was teaching vocabulary using the game. Through this observation, the researcher examined students' actions and behaviors while playing the game. An observation checklist was used to assess students' motivation during the activity. The third instrument was an interview. This research used a structured interview, which was conducted in the fifth meeting. This technique was intended to explore students' feelings during the game and to strengthen the data obtained from the observation checklists. The interview consisted of nine questions designed to gather students' opinions about the game.

The observation checklist consisted of thirteen indicators adapted from motivation frameworks proposed by Schunk et al, (2014) and Ryan and Deci (2020). The qualitative instruments were validated through expert review to ensure clarity and appropriateness for junior high school learners.

Quantitative data from the pre-test and post-test were analyzed using descriptive statistics and paired-samples t-test to determine whether the Word Tail Game significantly improved vocabulary achievement. Before conducting the t-test, the normality of the score distribution was examined using the Shapiro–Wilk test. All analyses were conducted using SPSS version 25.

Qualitative data from observations and interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. Codes were generated from repeated reading of the data, organized into themes representing motivational behaviors (e.g., confidence, persistence, enjoyment), and then compared with quantitative findings. Triangulation was achieved by comparing data from interviews, observation checklists, and test scores to strengthen credibility.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this research involve the data that was found through vocabulary tests. It intended to find out the effect of word tail game toward

students' vocabulary achievement. The other data were obtained through an observation checklist and interview to see the effect of the game toward students' motivation in learning vocabulary.

The Students' Achievement in Learning Vocabulary

The students' achievement was measured by using quantitative data through pre and post-test. Pre and post-test were intended to collect the students' vocabulary scores before and after the treatments. By comparing both scores on the tests, the researcher found out an improvement in the students' achievement in learning vocabulary. The result of the pre-test is showed in the table below:

Table 1. The Percentage of Students' Pre-test Score

Classification	Score	Frequency	Percentage
Excellent	91-100	1	5%
Good	76-90	10	50%
Average	61-75	4	20%
Poor	51-60	2	10%
Very poor	<50	3	15%
Total		20	100%

The pre-test results highlight a clear deficiency in vocabulary mastery. As shown in the table, the mean score was 71, with 45% of students classifying it as 'Average,' 'Poor,' or 'Very Poor.' Only a single student (5%) reached the 'Excellent' level. This distribution empirically supports the challenges identified by Zhu and Huang (2021); without daily immersion, students struggle to move beyond basic proficiency. Furthermore, the cluster of students in the lower bands suggests that the 'arduous' nature of traditional vocabulary learning has likely dampened student motivation and hindered earlier acquisition.

Meanwhile, the students' post-test scores display that twelve students got 91-100 scores classified as excellent. The other seven students got 76-90 scores which were classified as good, the rest of it was one student got 61-75 classified as average, and none students got a score below the average which was 51-60 and <50 indicating low initial vocabulary mastery. The percentage of the students' post-test scores is shown in the table below:

Table 2. The percentage of students' post-test score

Classification	Score	Frequency	Percentage
Excellent	91-100	12	60%
Good	76-90	7	35%
Average	61-75	1	5%

Poor	51-60	0	0%
Very poor	<50	0	0%
Total		20	100%

The table above indicates the students categorized as excellent are (60%), 7 (35%) students categorized as good, out of 20 students, the rest of it was 1 (5%) student categorized as average. None of the students were categorized as poor or very poor. The two tables collectively show that a teaching intervention was highly effective in elevating the majority, moving the vast majority of students into the top two proficiency bands. Besides, addressing the lower band: completely eliminating the lowest proficiency classifications ('Poor' and 'Very Poor'). The mean score and standard deviation of the students' pre and post-test are shown in the table below:

Table 3. Paired samples statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pretest	71.1500	20	17.30006	3.86841
	Posttest	90.8000	20	8.55078	1.91201

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics for the paired scores, showing a clear difference between the students' performance before the intervention (Pre-test M=71.15, SD=17.30) and after the intervention (Post-test M=90.80, SD=8.55). To test the statistical significance of this improvement, a paired-samples t-test was conducted. T-test was also used for the hypothesis test. In this quantitative data, the Null hypothesis (H0) was "There is no effect of word tail game towards students' achievement in learning vocabulary in junior high school". Whereas the Alternative hypothesis (H1) was "There is an effect of word tail game towards students' achievement in learning vocabulary in junior high school". The alternative hypothesis (H1) would be accepted if the significance's 2 value or sig. (2-tailed) less than 0,05 then the Null hypothesis would be rejected. The result of the t-test is shown in table 4.

Table 4. Paired samples test

	Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			

Pair 1	Pretest – Posttest	-19.65000	15.96138	3.56907	-27.12016	-12.17984	-5.506	19	.000

The table of the t-test result above presents that the Sig. (2-tailed) is 0.000. It is lower than 0.05 (the significance level). It means that the alternative hypothesis (H1) was accepted and the Null hypothesis (H0) was rejected. It proves that the word tail game had an effect toward students' achievement in learning vocabulary at the second grade of junior high school.

The calculation scores from the pre- and post-tests provide strong evidence that the Word Tail Game significantly affected students' vocabulary achievement. The magnitude of this improvement is clearly demonstrated by the mean score shift: the pre-test mean was 71.15, which increased substantially to 90.80 in the post-test. This enhancement in vocabulary ability was determined to be statistically significant, as the Paired Samples Test yielded a Sig. (2-tailed) value of 0.000, which is considerably lower than the required threshold of 0.05.

Thematic analysis of observation and interview data produced three major themes reflecting students' motivation during the Word Tail Game:

1. Enjoyment and Engagement: Students showed visible excitement, frequent smiling, and active participation, especially during group play.
2. Confidence and Willingness to Take Risks: Students increasingly volunteered answers and demonstrated reduced fear of making mistakes across sessions.
3. Persistence and Effort: Students displayed sustained effort in finding correct words and continued participating until the game ended.

These themes align with the Self-Determination Theory components of competence, autonomy, and relatedness.

The Students' Motivation in Learning Vocabulary

In order to find out the effect of the game toward the students' motivation, the researcher used observation checklist with several indicators. They were classified into several items. The researcher observed the students in five meetings, each meeting had a different rule of the game to see which rules was really suitable for the students. In the first meeting, the students were playing the game by writing it on the whiteboard one by one. In this meeting, the students were allowed to help one another as a team. The thirteen items of learning motivation indicators were not all achieved. Out of thirteen indicators, only seven indicators were fulfilled. In the next meeting, the game was played in three groups and the students were not allowed to help each other even as a

team, the game was still played by writing on the whiteboard. The third meeting was different than two meetings before. In this meeting, the game was played orally. The students retained to play the game in three groups and could not help one another. Each group was playing one by one. They had a certain time to find or mention vocabulary in English as much as they could until the time was up. In the last meeting, the game was played orally and individually. All the students were required to stand, if they could mention a right answer, then they could sit. If not, they had to keep standing until all the que were back to him. The result of the observation is shown in the table below:

Table 5. Observation checklists

No.	Items of Observation Checklists	1st Meeting	2nd Meeting	3rd Meeting	4th Meeting
1.	The students are paying attention when the teacher explained the rules of the game.	√	√	√	√
2.	The students are asking several questions when the teacher explains the game.	X	X	X	X
3.	The students are trying to guess the rule of the game when the teacher begins to explain the game.	X	X	X	√
4.	The students take part in the game by their own wants and do not need to be forced by others.	√	√	X	√
5.	The students are brave to utter a word without worrying it is true or not.	X	√	√	√
6.	The students are showing smiles and laughs while playing the game.	√	√	√	X
7.	The students are playing the game without asking their friends' hands.	X	X	X	X
8.	Each group is trying their best to win the game.	√	√	√	-

9.	Every student can find a correct word.	X	X	√	√
10.	The students do not give up until the game is done.	√	√	√	√
11.	The students can work as a team and help one another when the game is playing in groups.	√	√	√	-
12.	The students are not nervous.	√	√	X	√
13.	The students keep trying to find a correct word until the end of the game.	X	X	√	√

The second instrument that was used is interview. The researcher used structured interview to interview the students. This technique was used to find out the students feeling during the game. It also intended to strengthen the data in the observation checklists. The interview questions contained nine questions that was made to know the student's opinion of the game. The students who were chosen to be interviewed were those who have followed all the treatments before. The researcher interview four students, because most of their answer was the same and there was no new information again, that was why the researcher did not continue for the fifth students.

The first question in the interview session is about the way students learn vocabulary before they used this game and their perception of learning vocabulary by memorizing words. Most of them said that commonly they learn vocabulary through memorizing words. There was a student who learn vocabulary in online games and translated the words. Their answers revealed that they did not ever learn vocabulary by using kind of this game (word tail game). Even their teacher never provided this game to them in learning vocabulary. Their opinion about memorizing words in learning vocabulary is difficult. They might think will do it, yet it is still hard based on their perceptions. Then the next question is to find out how interesting and easier the game's rules in the eyes of the students. Based on the students', they said that they understood the rules of the game well.

In order to get deeper information, the researcher asked them whether they exited when playing the game in groups and individually or not. Most of them liked the game in groups rather than individually. The interview session also found out that the students were trying to do their best in the game process.

This is one of the sign of extrinsic motivation as cited in Wang & Guthrie (2004) and Serin (2018) it was said that extrinsic motivation can be known when the students participate of an activity as the result of encouragements, rewards, licenses, verbal praise, punishments and comments. In other words, this motivation arises from outside in which students actions to fulfill "external value and demands" (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Moreover, extrinsic motivation can be defined as a support which can increase the level of students' performance while they struggle for learning. Hence, if the students' extrinsic motivation is low or the treatments which is given by the teacher or any other factors are not interesting for them, then the result of their learning will be bad.

In this interview session, the students argued that this game is a good way to learn vocabulary. Because they can play a fun game and at the same time, their vocabulary will increase as well. All the results items of the motivation indicators in the observation checklists above are supported by the students' responses to the question in regards to their perceptions toward the word tail game. Mostly, their answer was almost the same. Here are the students' responses to the question:

Excerpt 1

S1 : It was fun. The point is it was good because it increased my vocabulary. *(Seru, Intinya bagus karena makin banyak ku hafal kosakata).*

S2 : It was good and fun. *(Bagus dan seru).*

S3 : It was fun because it made us knew more English vocabularies*. (Seru, karena lebih banyak ditau kosakata bahasa Inggris).*

Excerpt 2

S1 : It was really fun and competitive, which made me want to win. The point is the game was good because that challenge made me pay closer attention to the spelling of new words. *(Seru sekali dan kompetitif, yang membuat saya ingin menang. Intinya permainannya bagus karena tantangan itu membuat saya lebih memperhatikan ejaan kata-kata baru).*

S2 : It was good, very engaging, and less boring than just reading lists. *(Bagus, sangat menarik, dan tidak membosankan daripada hanya membaca daftar).*

S3 : It was fun because you had to think so quickly, and that actually made me recall the vocabularies I'd forgotten. *(Seru, karena kamu harus berpikir sangat cepat, dan itu justru membuat saya mengingat kosakata yang sudah saya lupakan).*

In the first meeting, the students were playing the game by writing it on the whiteboard one by one. In this meeting, the students were allowed to help one another as a team. The thirteen items of learning motivation indicators were not all achieved. Out of thirteen indicators, only seven indicators were fulfilled.

The second meeting was not significantly changed, yet there was one indicator finally achieved while the first meeting was not. In this meeting, there were eight indicators achieved and five were not. Those eight indicators are: reflective and inherent interest, the students' own sake, confidence, enjoyment and happiness, external motivation, one item in better performance indicator, work actively, and the last is no fear and pressure. "The students are brave to utter a word without worrying if it is true or not." The students looked more confident when they played the game for the second time and were divided into three groups. By playing the game in three groups, the number of groups' member was not a lot than if they were divided into two groups. It made each student got more chances.

On the third meeting, because the students playing the game orally, the number of indicators that were achieved before did not increase in this meeting. However, some indicators that were achieved in the previous meeting became unachieved in this meeting and so was the opposite. The indicators which were achieved in this meeting are: reflective and inherent interest, confidence, enjoyment and happiness, external motivation, two items in higher performance indicator, work actively, and, persistence. There are two indicators which were not achieved in the previous meetings became achieved in this meeting. The first is the better performance indicator. The item is "Every student can find a correct word." Out of expectation, the students could find and mentioned several words correctly until the game was done. The motivation of the students in this meeting were higher with a little worry of making mistake.

On the last meeting, there were three indicators not achieved in this meeting, because two indicators were tended to be played in groups. However, the other eight indicators were achieved. This meeting showed that the students were not showing smiles and laughs in this meeting. It is the item of enjoyment and happiness. The researcher assumed that it happened because they were playing individually. They had to be serious to find a correct word, so they can be safe. Another thing was beyond of the researcher expectation again. The researcher expected that the students would be nervous if the game played orally along the lines of the third meeting. In the opposite of the researcher expectation, the students did not look nervous.

From all the discussion above, dealing with the indicators that showed the students' motivation in each meeting. It can be seen that out of thirteen indicators, most of them were success to be achieved in every meeting. Although, there were some indicators that were not achieved in each meeting, yet, it changed from one meeting to another. Some indicators might fail to be achieved in certain meetings but succeed to fulfill in another meeting with

another rules. The interviewed session also proved that the students liked to play the game better than memorizing in learning vocabulary. The students said that playing word tail game was fun and they were excited to win the game.

The findings of this study confirmed that the Word Tail Game positively influenced both students' vocabulary achievement and learning motivation. The significant improvement in test scores aligns with earlier studies indicating that game-based learning enhances vocabulary mastery by promoting active retrieval and repeated exposure (Permatasari, 2024; Suryani, 2020). The observed motivational behaviors support the Self-Determination Theory, which posits that learning environments fulfilling students' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness foster greater intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Students' enjoyment and active engagement observed in the classroom also reflect Krashen's (1982) assertion that lowering the affective filter increases learner readiness for language intake. Moreover, the increased confidence shown in later sessions suggests that repeated game cycles help reduce anxiety and build mastery. These findings are consistent with studies by Jones et al. (2025) and Tanaka (2022), who found that positive learning climates contribute to greater student participation and commitment.

However, this study has several limitations. First, the sample size was small and limited to one school, which restricts generalizability. Second, the intervention lasted only four meetings, so long-term effects remain unknown. Third, the qualitative data relied on student self-report, which may include subjective bias. Future studies should involve a larger and more diverse population and extend the duration of the intervention to measure retention over time.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study demonstrate that the Word Tail Game is an effective strategy for enhancing both vocabulary achievement and motivation among eighth-grade EFL learners. Quantitative analysis revealed a significant improvement in students' vocabulary scores after the intervention, while qualitative findings indicated strong motivational behaviors such as enjoyment, confidence, and persistence.

These findings highlight the potential of simple, low-cost game-based approaches to support vocabulary learning in junior high school contexts. Teachers are encouraged to integrate verbal games such as the Word Tail Game into their instructional routines to stimulate active participation and create a

more engaging learning environment. Future research should explore long-term impacts and examine how similar game-based strategies can be adapted for different language skills and grade levels.

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