

# Learning English Vocabulary with *Taboo* Game: A Case Study of Indonesian Junior High School Students

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## Abstract

Vocabulary serves as the basis for the four language skills. However, for many EFL learners, vocabulary mastery is difficult to achieve. This situation requires English teachers to find and utilize different approaches to help make vocabulary learning more enjoyable yet engaging for their students. This study aimed to elucidate English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' reflections after utilizing the Taboo game for vocabulary learning and to explore their perceptions of its benefits. A qualitative method was used in the current study. The data were gathered through in-depth interviews and questionnaires. This research was carried out at one private junior high school in Medan, Indonesia. Thirty-four second-year students agreed to participate in the study (15 females; 19 males). The results of data analysis through *frequency count* and *Content Analysis* revealed that most students were satisfied with learning vocabulary through the Taboo game. Furthermore, in terms of their perceptions, the students reported three benefits (1) *Improvement of vocabulary mastery*, (2) *Enhanced vocabulary recall* (3) *Higher engagement*. In general, the Taboo game was perceived positively by all the student participants. Moreover, the Taboo game assists in learning and understanding materials, making it easier to know and learn new vocabulary and increasing their learning creativity.

## Keywords

English as a foreign language (EFL)  
Game-based learning  
Taboo game

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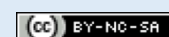
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## Introduction

Vocabulary is the material or verbal property that a person has through language. Vocabulary plays a significant role in determining the flow of communication since nothing can be communicated without vocabulary (Thornbury, 2002). Furthermore, vocabulary serves as the basis for the four language skills; speaking, reading, listening, and writing (Cameron, 2001; Hapsari, I. I., & Suminar, 2003). This is to say that learning a language, whether English, Indonesian, or any other language, is much impacted by how much vocabulary a language learner masters. Regarding its pivotal role in language mastery, learning vocabulary requires students to be familiar with various terms to comprehend the lesson thoroughly and operate in a language. Learners must have a relatively vast vocabulary (Suparyanto dan Rosad (2015, 2020).

Vocabulary has been one of the core skills taught to English as a foreign language (EFL) learners because vocabulary mastery substantially influences their capacity to express their thoughts and ideas verbally and in writing in English (Riyanto, 2007). Unfortunately, most EFL students worldwide find vocabulary study incredibly challenging and time-consuming in terms of long-term retention (Namaziandost et al., 2021). A similar issue was also seen in the context of vocabulary acquisition in Indonesian EFL. Levels from primary to senior high school students struggle with English vocabulary learning (Patahuddin et al., 2017). Students in primary school find it difficult to learn English vocabulary because they feel unfamiliar with new words, making it harder for them to retain vocabulary pronunciation (Saridevita et al., 2022). Furthermore, many elementary schools have taken English out of their curriculums for 2013 (Zein, 2022). This means that elementary school students know less about vocabulary, even though learning English, especially memorizing vocabulary makes it easier for students to move on to the next level. Similarly, in the junior and senior high school levels, their problem in learning vocabulary was the difficulty in memorizing it, and it was also difficult for them to pronounce the words because they were unfamiliar with the pronunciation (Komalasari, 2022; Yuliawati & YB, 2020). In other words, a lack of English vocabulary makes it difficult for students in Indonesia to learn the English language (Al-Khasawneh, 2019). Moreover, in Junior High Schools in Indonesia, the student's failure to master English vocabulary is due to various problems. Which include: students' inability to comprehend the meanings of texts or conversations (Hemmati, T., & Asmawi, 2015; Ismail, 2015; Mukoroli, 2011; Patahuddin et al., 2017), anxiety (Hanifa, 2018), lack of learning strategies and techniques (Asyiah, 2017; Besthia, 2018; Rahmatika, A., Pertiwi, D., Karmala, E. T., & Nastiti, 2018; Rionaldi, & Saputra, 2016), no facilities provided (Wardah, 2022) and pronunciation (Saridevita et al., 2022).

Responding to EFL students' challenges when learning vocabulary, English teachers must make vocabulary learning enjoyable for their students (Fithriani,

2018; Simamora & Oktaviani, 2020). This might be accomplished by presenting the topic in an exciting manner while maintaining focus on the learning objective. That is to "support vocabulary development by teaching learners important terms and enabling learners to figure out meanings on their own" (Linse, 2006). Popularly referred to as game-based learning, game-based learning is one of the most well-known strategies for entertaining and engaging learning (Qi et al., 2011). The challenging and monotonous course content is simplified through game-based learning, and the information and skills taught in the course are made accessible. Game-based learning (GBL) includes several qualities, including Representation, Fun, Play, Goals, Outcomes and Feedback, Win States, Competition/Challenge, Problem-solving, Task, Story, and so forth, to boost student learning motivation (Dewantara et al., 2020; Krouska et al., 2022).

There are numerous pedagogical benefits of using games-based learning in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms (Fithriani, 2021). In agreement with the previous viewpoint, Luisa (2022) asserts that game-based learning can aid in language learning by creating an environment that permits appropriate exposure to the target language. Using educational games in the classroom can aid students in learning vocabulary more quickly and with tremendous enthusiasm (Fithriani, 2018; Glaveanu, vlad pete., 2016). Game-based learning is one of the most effective teaching methods, especially for motivating pupils to learn more (Qi et al., 2011). Moreover, game-based learning is entertaining activities that incorporate instructional content and serve a necessary purpose (Muhajarah & Rachmawati, 2019).

Even though games-based learning is used a lot to learn languages, especially English, most of the time, they are used on computers and handheld devices (Umniati et al., 2023). However, not all EFL(English Foreign Learner) students have a stable financial situation; many of them cannot afford to purchase cell phones or laptops to aid their education (Fitriyah, 2021). Moreover, not all educational institutions have sufficient funds to purchase computers, and other technology learning aids for their students, including the Internet, computers, and other ICT infrastructure (Manguni, 2022). Furthermore, in the situation where students can purchase the technology themselves, some schools implement the policy not allowing their students to bring handheld devices like cellphones and tablets into the classroom out of concern that they may distract students and impede learning (CENDEKIA, n.d.). Empirical evidence has also shown that the use of mobile devices for educational purposes have shown a number of potential issues, such as using their cell phones during class time or for non-learning-related causes (Fithriani, 2021). However, these unpleasant conditions are not intended to prevent EFL teachers from implementing GBL(game-based learning) in their courses. Teachers just need to find different ways to implement GBL with or without technological supports.

This study aims to provide light on how non-digital games are utilized in EFL classes, particularly to aid students in learning new vocabulary. This study examines explicitly how junior high school students feel about utilizing the card game Taboo Game in English vocabulary lessons. Most English classrooms at all grade levels utilize taboo games because they may be modified to match the context (Maria, 2021). Furthermore, this game is affordable because teachers may manufacture their cards and modify the terms according to the content, which can increase students' comprehension of the subject (Rumidjan, R., Sumanto, S., &

Badawi, 2017) and contribute to the achievement of the learning objectives. Students can boost their competition, collaboration, passion, and drive to study the language by playing taboo games (Maria, 2021).

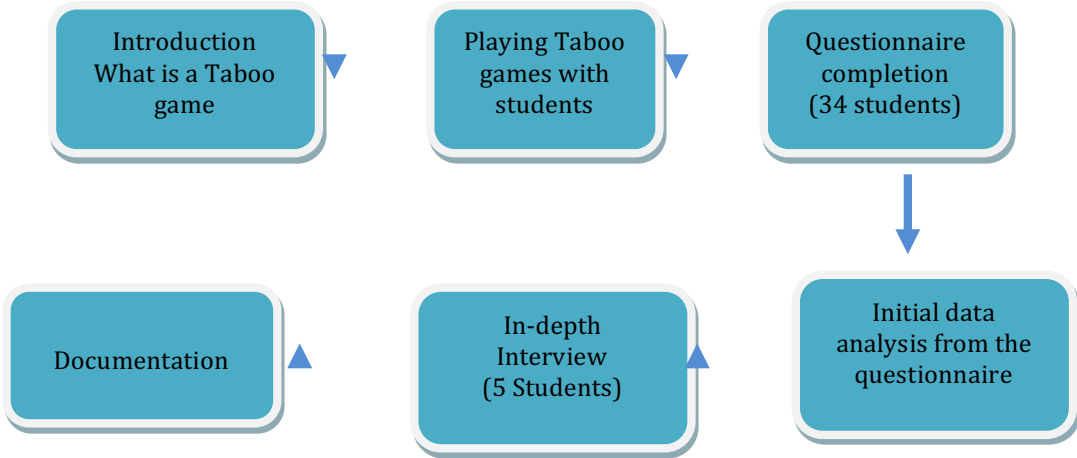
Regarding the possible advantages of Taboo games, the researchers utilized Taboo Games in this investigation, which was directed by the following questions:

- 1) How do learners reflect after utilizing the Taboo game for vocabulary learning?
- 2) How do students evaluate the game's benefits?.

### Method

This investigation utilized a qualitative methodology, which is suitable to explore people's perspectives, experiences, attitudes, behavior, and interactions (Pathak, Jena, & Kalra, 2013). In addition, this study was conducted in one private junior high school in Medan, Indonesia. This research included 34 second-year students who volunteered to participate (15 females; 19 males). Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data on the experiences and perceived benefits of the Taboo game for vocabulary development among students. The questionnaire consisted of ten questions which were designed to elicit the participants' perspectives on the usage of the Taboo game in English classes, particularly vocabulary instruction. Five possible responses were provided, namely: strongly disagree, disagree, no idea, agree, and strongly agree. Students were asked to select a response based on their perspective. The semi-structured in-depth interviews were later conducted with five volunteer participants. The interview comprised questions regarding how students felt about utilizing the Taboo game to promote their vocabulary knowledge, vocabulary recall, and classroom engagement. Figure 1 details the data collection procedure.

Figure1.  
Overview of the procedure of the study



Prior to this study, 21 out of the 34 participants said they had never played Taboo game. Therefore, it was vital for the researchers to present the game to the

participants and familiarize them with its rules and method. Before the intervention, participants in each group were given instructions on how to play this game. Taboo is a card game in which the wording on each card must be guessed, and the researchers should discuss the game's rules during the meeting. The following are the rules: (1) None of the taboo terms mentioned below the guess word may be spoken; (2) No hand gestures or sound effects may be utilized; (3) You may not state that the guess word sounds similar to or rhymes with another word; (4) No portion of ANY word may be spoken. For example, if the guess word is a spaceship, students cannot say space or ship; if the Taboo word is drink, students cannot say intoxicated. (5) No abbreviations or initials are allowed for any terms; (6) If a rule is breached, the opposing team sounds the buzzer and explains why while the other team observes the Clue Giver's card. Consequently, the card is now regarded dead and discarded before a new card is drawn to continue the game; (7) all cards on the easel and in the discard pile are withdrawn from play, and The Clue Giver continues to take turns until the timer ends. In order to begin the game, the researchers presented each student with a Taboo card and asks them to guess by following the stated instructions. After all of the words had been appropriately identified by the students, the winning group had the highest score, and this study was conducted in four class meetings. Figure 2 displays an example of the Taboo card.

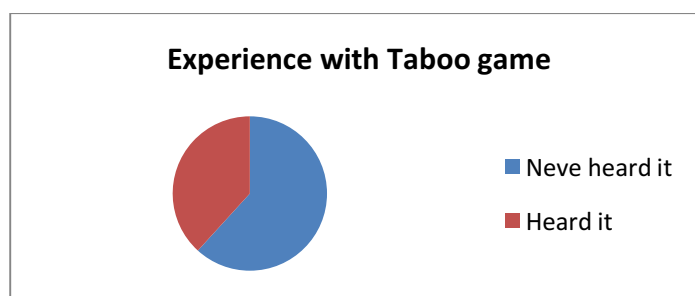
Figure2.  
Sample of a Taboo game



**Meeting 1**

In the first meeting, the researchers asked the students whether they had ever heard of or played the Taboo game. Twenty-one students claimed they had never heard of or played the Taboo game, compared to thirteen who had (Figure 3 shows this). The researchers explained the Taboo Game to the students and exhibited some intriguing Taboo cards in an attempt to capture their interest (figure2). It was intended to inspire them to acquire vocabulary in a manner similar to playing games. Students will learn more efficiently if they love the learning process since this will capture their attention and keep them engaged. According to Anjaniputra and Salsabila (2018), involving students in their education is one of the benefits of adopting technology since it enables them to explore their interests and learn at their own pace. This affords individuals the power to govern their conduct in relation to their schooling.

Figure3.  
Participants' experiences with Taboo games before the study



### ***Meeting 2***

At the second meeting, the students were prepared to play the Taboo game because they already understood how to play; they were all eager to participate. When taboo games teach vocabulary, students become extraordinarily engaged and eager. At this meeting, they were separated into two teams, Squad A and Team B, with Team A dubbed the "Incredible team," and Team B dubbed the "Intelligent team"; each team consisted of 12 randomly selected individuals. However, because of a lack of language, the students still had difficulty playing the taboo game, but the researchers advised them that it was acceptable to go slowly, as this was the first trial of the game, and it would take a few minutes to predict each card. Nonetheless, after several rounds of play, the students were accustomed to the game and found it easy to speak the suggestions on the cards, and some of them quickly identified the target word; their eagerness and desire to win drove them to consider the new vocabulary.

### ***Meeting 3***

Students proceeded to play the taboo game during this gathering. However, the researchers specified the guidelines and time limit for guessing each phrase during this conference. The students' anxiety was evident, yet both Teams A and B were able to complete all of the cards successfully, despite the fact that there were some cards they were unable to correctly identify due to unfamiliarity with the offered clues. The researchers instructed the students to record new terminology after the game. At this gathering, the students competed in three rounds, with team B prevailing in the first, team A in the second, and team A in the final. Team B lost, but they liked learning and actively participated in the activity.

### ***Meeting 4***

At the last meeting, the researchers distributed a questionnaire to each student about the use of the taboo game in learning vocabulary and interviewed five students.

## Results

### Evaluation of learners' learning reflection on using the Taboo game

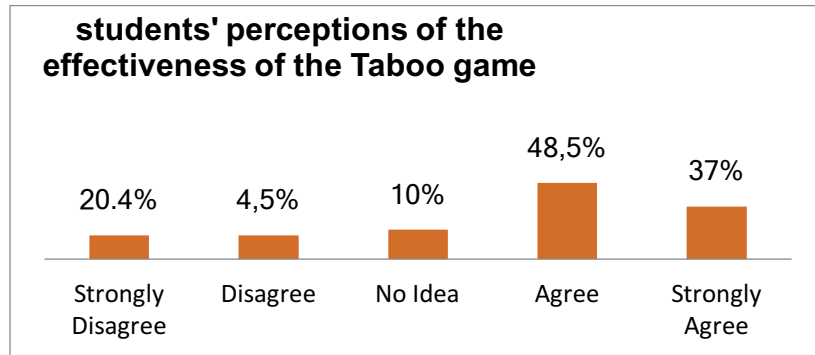
In order to answer the research question, the learners' answers to the questionnaires about how they thought the Taboo game could be used were looked at. Nevertheless, the students learning English liked the Taboo game and said that it helped them remember and say English words. Also, the participants said that using the method made it more likely that they would be able to speak English, and most of them said they would like to practice speaking with the help of the Taboo game in the future. They learned English words and wanted to practice speaking a lot so that they could do well in the speaking game. The findings of the survey are presented in Table 1.

Table1.  
Questionnaire Data

Questions	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Idea	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. I'm so motivated when I try to learn vocabulary with Taboo Game.	0%	0%	10%	45%	45%
2. When I face a word that I don't know, I'm so motivated to learn it.	5%	15%	5%	55%	20%
3. The taboo game makes vocabulary Learning more boring.	55%	35%	10%	0%	0%
4. Learning vocabulary with the Taboo game is stressful.	85%	15%	0%	0%	0%
5. I learned new words visually.	5%	5%	5%	70%	15%
6. Learn with Taboo game motivated me to continue my learning for long hours.	0%	0%	0%	65%	35%
7. The taboo game helped me to get the meaning of new words.	0%	0%	15%	60%	25%
8. When playing, I felt like I was in an English-speaking country.	5%	10%	50%	20%	15%
9. The Taboo game provided opportunities for deepening my word knowledge.	0%	0%	5%	55%	40%
10. I think Taboo games make vocabulary learning more interesting	0%	0%	0%	65%	35%

From the questionnaire table, the Taboo game has a significant effect on how well a student can use words. During the teaching and learning process, the students paid close attention to what the teacher said. The students were interested in the Taboo Word Game. The results show that Taboo Word Game helps students learn more words than traditional ways of teaching. The data from the questionnaires were looked at, and the results showed that 85.5% of the students were joyful with how the Taboo game helped them learn new vocabulary. As shown in (Figure 4), the students said that using the Taboo game to learn new vocabulary helped them the most and was the most effective way to learn.

Figure 4.  
The frequency questionnaire data



From the chart above, you can see that 37% of students strongly agree that the Taboo game is effective, 48.5% agree, 10% have no idea, 4.5% disagree, and 20.4% strongly disagree. The results showed that the Taboo game helps students learn new words and master them.

### **Students' perception of the benefits of Using Taboo Game**

Games are, in reality, a collection of language-learning instruments (Misirli, 2007). Consequently, games may be an efficient tool for learning new and valuable languages. The primary reasons why games are utilized as learning aids are that they increase student motivation and are effective in competitive play; also, students do better in games than in other classes (Deesri, 2002).

#### ***Improvement of vocabulary mastery***

The majority of students found that playing Taboo improved their language comprehension. According to students, the learn with Taboo game helps them develop their speaking and listening skills, and as a consequence, they find it much simpler to identify the word on the Taboo card, as seen by the following excerpts:

"This game is great for presenters because they are good at putting together clues that have to be guessed on taboo cards."  
(Interview, excerpt 1)

"I think that the Taboo game not only helps us learn new words but also tells us what words are related to the words that we have to guess."  
(Interview, excerpt 2)

According to student interviews, the usage of game-based learning using the Taboo game boosted vocabulary knowledge. In addition, researchers' observations made during gameplay indicate that students appear quite happy while utilizing the Taboo game to participate in the learning process and that the game boosts students' confidence in expressing themselves in English.

#### ***Enhanced vocabulary recall***



The acquired results demonstrated that the Taboo game aided students in enhancing their vocabulary recall and motivation when remembering words. Furthermore, students saved more time by applying Taboo game methods. Students stated that they preferred playing the Taboo game to memorize vocabulary rather than repeating the word numerous times. Due to the memorizing that occurs during gameplay, time seems to pass more swiftly.

"It takes me a long time and makes me bored to read a lot of vocabulary because I have to read it over and over again. But when I play the Taboo game, it's a lot easier for me once I learn how to use this specific strategy. This is because we play while we learn new words. It saved me a lot of time and pushed me to learn."  
(Interview, Excerpt No. 4)

"Playing this game is a better way for me to learn new words in a day than sitting down and memorizing, and that makes me excited to do it."  
(Interview, Excerpt No. 5)

This research supports the premise that learning time may be preserved for other tasks, such as reading and recalling class materials. This is a technique for transferring vocabulary from short-term to long-term memory and building a solid relationship by discovering specific components in the mental lexicon with which the new lexical word may be associated (Schmitt, 2000). Enhanced vocabulary recall is a memory-improving educational strategy in which students are educated to make associations between newly taught information and previously learned content. If information is delivered in a way that complements or strongly links to what is already known, it will be retained for relatively extended periods of time, and retrieval via verbal or visual cues will be relatively straightforward. In other words, educators may utilize the Taboo game to link new language to existing terminology already stored in students' long-term memories.

### ***Higher Engagement***

The data from the questionnaire indicate that the students are more engaged while learning vocabulary using the Taboo game. The students agree that they are highly motivated when learning vocabulary with the Taboo game, agree to study vocabulary with the Taboo game for an extended period, and disagree when asked whether the Taboo game left them bored and anxious, these findings are produced. This idea is further backed by the following findings from interviews conducted by researchers:

"I wasn't interested in this game since I imagined it would be difficult. However, as the game begins, it becomes really engaging; this game is also beneficial for vocabulary study."  
(Excerpt 6, interview)

"Taboo is a wonderful game, although I sometimes find it difficult to identify the words on the taboo card. However, this game has taught me a vocabulary I didn't know before, and it's a lot of fun."  
(Excerpt 7, interview)

According to the findings of the student interviews, before the game began, the students did not find it intriguing, but after playing, they were quite engaged while

occasionally having problems saying English terms they did not know. In addition, the results of student interviews verified the researchers' hypothesis that the Taboo game boosted student interest in vocabulary acquisition. In addition, the Taboo game motivates students to compete, participate, be excited, and be driven to acquire language (Maria, 2021). Students who use repetition to explain prohibited terms improve their pronunciation.

Additionally, the Taboo game assists students in strengthening their relationships with their peers and enhancing their English ability. Some institutions think that adopting games to improve students' interpersonal skills and vocabulary may be highly advantageous if the students are actively engaged in playing with their classmates (Akdogan, 2017). According to a number of learning theories, motivation is crucial for learning. This Taboo game might be seen as an effort to improve student motivation and interest in studying. In addition, students believe that Taboo Game is a beautiful instrument for learning difficult vocabulary in an easy and entertaining manner.

## Discussion

According to the findings of the student interviews, before the game began, the students did not find it intriguing, but after playing, they were pretty engaged while occasionally having problems saying English terms they did not know. In addition, the results of student interviews verified the researchers' hypothesis that the Taboo game boosted student interest in vocabulary acquisition. In addition, the Taboo game motivates kids to compete, participate, be excited, and be driven to acquire language (Maria, 2021). According to a number of learning theories, motivation is crucial for learning. This Taboo game might be seen as an effort to improve student motivation and interest in studying.

In this study, the use of the Taboo game proved surprisingly effective at motivating EFL learners, particularly junior high school students, to acquire new vocabulary and recall previously learned vocabulary proficiency. According to the qualitative findings, the students believed that utilizing the Taboo game as a vocabulary learning aid in this study improved their vocabulary mastery, increased their vocabulary recall, and increased their engagement when using Taboo as an alternative method. The findings of the questionnaire revealed that 85.5% of students were comfortable with the Taboo game for teaching vocabulary. Students have also verified that the Taboo game creates a more fun learning environment, and pleasure is the primary motivation for the usage of games in the classroom (Sweetser, P., & Wyeth, 2005). Students' attention, persistence, inquisitiveness, and competitive drives, which enhance the learning process, would likely improve if they loved playing games. This finding complements prior studies indicating that pleasure may influence the effectiveness of gamification for EFL learning (Ebrahimzadeh, M. & Alavi, 2016; Hung, H.-C., & Young, 2015).

Despite the positive results, this study contains limitations that restrict its generalizability and present potential for further investigation. First, the sample size was small; subsequent studies with more significant sample sizes may yield better results. Second, the current study only involved one EFL class and was conducted over the course of four meetings. For more thorough conclusions, future research must include a more significant student population over a longer time span. This study included simply a questionnaire and an interview to assess the effectiveness

of the Taboo game on vocabulary learning. A future study employing pre-, post-, and delayed post-tests is deemed necessary to see if its effectiveness enhances both short-term and long-term vocabulary development.

## Conclusion

On the basis of the research findings, it can be concluded that Indonesian EFL students, particularly Junior High School students, found the implementation of the Taboo game in learning English vocabulary to be significant in enhancing their EFL vocabulary, particularly their speaking and listening skills. Due to the restricted vocabulary, the majority of students reported that playing this game improved their memorization skills and reduced their anxiety over misreading English words. The recent study indicated that the Taboo game might be useful for helping students memorize and enhance their English class vocabulary. Although the tactics have the potential to aid students, instructors must be mindful of the obstacles. However, the benefits exceed the drawbacks. The benefits, which include improved student engagement in the learning process, suggest that it is worthwhile to implement this method in the classroom. Students may assume that playing Taboo reduces their responsibilities. There are several advantages to adopting a Taboo game, one of which is that the learning process becomes enjoyable owing to the engaging character of the game; hence, the implementation of a Taboo game may make students like class. This is demonstrated by the participants' enthusiasm and enthusiasm during the game's performance.

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