



ENHANCING SEVENTH GRADE STUDENTS' VOCABULARY MASTERY THROUGH THE APPLICATION OF SPELLING BEE GAME AT SMPN 10 KUPANG

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Abstract

Vocabulary plays a crucial role in second language acquisition and underpins the four key skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. However, many Indonesian junior high school students struggle to master vocabulary due to monotonous, teacher-centered instructional approaches. This study investigated the effectiveness of the Spelling Bee Game in improving vocabulary mastery among seventh-grade students at SMPN 10 Kupang. Using a one-group pre-test–post-test design, 20 students from class VII H were selected through purposive sampling. A vocabulary spelling test with 20 items on professions and animals was administered before and after the intervention. Results revealed a substantial improvement in mean scores (pre-test: 28.5; post-test: 73.5; gain: 45 points). A paired-samples t-test ($t = 10.57$, $p < 0.05$) confirmed that the difference was statistically significant. These findings suggest that the Spelling Bee Game is an engaging and effective strategy for enhancing vocabulary mastery, promoting motivation, and reinforcing spelling and pronunciation. Future studies with larger samples and control groups are recommended to validate these results.

Keywords: Vocabulary Mastery, Game-Based Learning, Spelling Bee Game, Junior High School, English Language Teaching.

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is widely recognized as a fundamental component of language learning. It serves as the building block for communication and the foundation upon which the four essential language skills listening, speaking, reading, and writing are developed. Without a sufficient vocabulary, students struggle to understand input or produce meaningful output, thereby hindering overall language proficiency (Thornbury, 2004). Wilkins, as cited in Thornbury (2004), profoundly stated that “without grammar very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed.” This statement underscores the vital role of vocabulary mastery in facilitating effective communication.

Despite its importance, vocabulary instruction particularly at the junior high school level presents a number of pedagogical challenges. Students often find vocabulary learning tedious, especially when instruction relies heavily on rote memorization, word lists, or textbook-based drills (Asmayanti, 2015). Such methods may result in temporary memorization rather than long-term retention, and they often fail to engage students emotionally or cognitively. Furthermore, the lack of meaningful context and active involvement in vocabulary learning makes it harder for learners to internalize and use new words effectively.

To overcome these challenges, educators are encouraged to adopt interactive and student-centered teaching methods that make vocabulary learning more dynamic, relevant, and enjoyable. One promising strategy is the use of educational games, which have been shown to increase student motivation, engagement, and vocabulary retention. As Ellis and Brewster (2002) note, games provide a context for meaningful language use and offer repeated exposure to new words in an enjoyable format. They also create a positive learning atmosphere where students feel more comfortable experimenting with language.

Among the various vocabulary games, the Spelling Bee Game has gained popularity due to its effectiveness in reinforcing spelling and vocabulary simultaneously. According to Kichura (2008), Spelling Bee competitions sharpen learners' accuracy in spelling while improving word recognition and pronunciation. Rohmawati (2015) & Anggreini (2022) further explains that Spelling Bee encourages active recall, which is crucial for memory consolidation and long-term retention. Additionally, the competitive nature of the game fosters a sense of excitement and motivation, especially in younger learners.

Classroom observations during Teaching Practice at SMPN 10 Kupang revealed that many students had low levels of vocabulary mastery, particularly in specific word categories such as professions and animals. This issue was attributed in part to the monotonous and teacher-centered approaches used in vocabulary instruction. Students appeared disengaged, and vocabulary learning was perceived as a passive and repetitive task rather than an active and enjoyable process.

In response to this observed problem, the present study seeks to investigate the effectiveness of the Spelling Bee Game as a tool to improve students' vocabulary mastery. Specifically, the research focuses on whether the implementation of the Spelling Bee Game can significantly enhance students' ability to learn and retain vocabulary in the categories of professions and animals, two commonly taught topics at the junior high school level. It is hoped that the findings of this study will contribute to the improvement of vocabulary instruction by providing empirical evidence on the use of game-based learning in Indonesian secondary education contexts.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study used a pre-experimental one-group pre-test and post-test design (Sugiyono, 2014). The population consisted of 240 seventh-grade students at SMPN 10 Kupang, and a purposive sample of 20 students from class VII H was selected. The instrument used was a spelling vocabulary test consisting of 20 items divided into two categories: kinds of professions and kinds of animals. The pre-test was conducted before treatment, and the post-test was administered after the implementation of the Spelling Bee Game. Each correct spelling was scored 5 points; incorrect answers received 1 point. During the treatment, students were divided into groups and participated in multiple rounds of Spelling Bee activities. Vocabulary lists were provided beforehand for practice. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (mean, percentage) and inferential statistics (t-test) to determine whether the difference between pre-test and post-test scores was statistically significant.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of the Spelling Bee Game in improving students' vocabulary mastery, particularly in the categories of professions and animals. The findings from the pre-test and post-test reveal a clear picture of the students' progress before and after the treatment. Prior to the implementation of the Spelling Bee Game, students took a pre-test that assessed their ability to spell and understand specific vocabulary items. The results showed an average score of 28.5, which falls into the category of very poor vocabulary mastery. This low

score reflects the students' limited exposure to the target vocabulary, as well as a lack of effective learning strategies to support vocabulary retention and usage. Errors observed during the pre-test ranged from incorrect spelling to complete unfamiliarity with basic words, suggesting that students had not internalized the vocabulary in a meaningful way. These results highlight the urgency of adopting more interactive and engaging approaches to vocabulary instruction.

Following the treatment phase, during which the Spelling Bee Game was implemented as the main instructional method, students demonstrated a remarkable improvement in vocabulary performance. The post-test average increased significantly to 73.5, representing a shift to a much higher level of mastery, ranging from fair to excellent based on the scoring rubric. This positive development indicates that the students were not only able to recall and spell vocabulary items more accurately but were also more confident in their responses. Observations during the post-test revealed that students approached the test with greater enthusiasm and were better prepared, which suggests that the Spelling Bee Game contributed not only to academic improvement but also to increased motivation and classroom engagement. The nature of the game, which encourages repetition and active recall, likely played a significant role in reinforcing vocabulary retention.

To statistically verify whether the improvement in scores was not due to chance, a paired sample t-test was conducted to compare the pre-test and post-test results. The test yielded a t-value of 10.57, which is significantly higher than the critical value of 1.72 at a significance level of 0.05, with 19 degrees of freedom. This means that the difference in students' scores before and after the treatment is statistically significant, confirming that the improvement was indeed a result of the intervention rather than random variation. Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_0), which proposed that there would be no significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores, was rejected. Conversely, the alternative hypothesis (H_1), which stated that there would be a significant improvement in vocabulary mastery following the use of the Spelling Bee Game, was accepted. These findings provide strong empirical support for the effectiveness of the game as a teaching tool in vocabulary instruction.

In conclusion, the quantitative results from the pre-test and post-test, supported by statistical analysis, indicate that the Spelling Bee Game is not only an engaging activity but also a powerful instructional method for improving vocabulary among junior high school students. The significant gain in test scores demonstrates the educational value of integrating game-based strategies into English language teaching, particularly when targeting foundational language skills like vocabulary.

Discussion

The improvement in students' vocabulary performance following the use of the Spelling Bee Game reveals much about the role of interactive learning in language acquisition. Traditional methods of vocabulary instruction often rely on memorization and repetition without context, which can lead to disengagement and rapid forgetting. In contrast, game-based learning provides a dynamic and meaningful context in which students can internalize new words. The findings of this study suggest that the Spelling Bee Game successfully transformed vocabulary learning from a passive to an active process, where students participated enthusiastically and were cognitively involved in constructing knowledge. The competitive yet supportive nature of the game created a learning atmosphere that was both challenging and enjoyable, encouraging students to push beyond their comfort zones and engage more deeply with the language material.

The results are in line with previous research by Ellis and Brewster (2002), who advocate for the use of games as a valuable part of language instruction. According to their perspective, games provide meaningful opportunities for communication and help students develop fluency in using new words. This is further supported by Inayatullah (2012), whose study found that students taught using spelling games demonstrated better retention and recall of vocabulary. The consistency between these studies and the present research suggests that the Spelling Bee Game is effective across different educational settings and student proficiency levels. In particular, the structured repetition and reinforcement in spelling activities strengthen both visual and auditory

memory of words, which are critical components in long-term vocabulary acquisition.

Moreover, the motivational impact of the Spelling Bee Game should not be underestimated. Payra and Stephanie (2016) highlight that motivation is a key driver of learning, and that competitive elements in classroom activities can enhance students' focus, effort, and persistence. In this study, students were noticeably more eager to participate, often practicing words outside of class in preparation for the game sessions. This behavioral change points to the transformative potential of engaging instructional strategies. The game created a platform where students could experience success, receive immediate feedback, and feel a sense of accomplishment—all of which contribute to positive reinforcement and improved learning outcomes.

In addition to its motivational benefits, the Spelling Bee Game also supports accurate spelling, pronunciation, and vocabulary development. As noted by Rohmawati (2015), repeated spelling practice enhances familiarity with word forms and builds phonological awareness, which is essential for both oral and written communication. In this study, students who initially struggled with spelling became more confident and accurate in their performance. The combination of auditory input (hearing words), visual reinforcement (seeing words written), and kinesthetic involvement (spelling aloud) created a multisensory learning experience that catered to various learning styles.

From a theoretical standpoint, this research aligns closely with the vocabulary acquisition framework proposed by Hatch and Brown (1995). Their model outlines a five-stage process: encountering new words, getting the meaning, consolidating form and meaning in memory, using the word, and reviewing it. The Spelling Bee Game naturally incorporated each of these stages. Students were first introduced to vocabulary lists (encounter), learned meanings through discussion (meaning), practiced spelling and usage (memory and use), and reviewed words across multiple rounds of the game (review). This comprehensive engagement allowed students to move beyond recognition to actual application of vocabulary, which is the ultimate goal of language learning.

Finally, the overall findings suggest that the use of the Spelling Bee Game has broader implications for language teaching in Indonesian schools, especially at the junior secondary level. Many English teachers face challenges in maintaining student interest in vocabulary lessons due to monotonous teaching practices. This study provides evidence that incorporating games like Spelling Bee can significantly boost learning outcomes while simultaneously making the classroom more enjoyable. Given its low-cost, adaptable, and easy-to-implement nature, the Spelling Bee Game can be a valuable addition to the instructional toolkit of English teachers seeking to improve student vocabulary mastery in fun and effective ways.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and analysis presented in this study, it can be concluded that the use of the Spelling Bee Game significantly improves the vocabulary mastery of seventh-grade students at SMPN 10 Kupang. The results of the pre-test and post-test revealed a marked increase in students' vocabulary scores, with the average rising from 28.5 (very poor) to 73.5 (fair to excellent). The gain score of 45 points and the t-test result of 10.57, which exceeded the critical value at the 0.05 significance level, provide strong statistical evidence that the improvement was not due to chance but directly influenced by the implementation of the game.

The Spelling Bee Game contributed positively to students' learning by providing a structured yet enjoyable environment where they could repeatedly practice and reinforce vocabulary through spelling, pronunciation, and active recall. This method also fostered increased motivation, classroom engagement, and learner confidence, making vocabulary learning more interactive and meaningful. Furthermore, the game aligns with vocabulary learning theories, particularly the model proposed by Hatch and Brown, by engaging learners in all essential stages of vocabulary acquisition from encountering and understanding new words to using and reviewing them in context.

Therefore, it is recommended that English teachers, especially at the junior high school level, consider incorporating Spelling Bee activities as part of their instructional strategies. As demonstrated in this study, the game not only enhances students' vocabulary knowledge but also transforms the classroom into a more dynamic, collaborative, and student-centered learning environment.

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