


Unlocking Vocabulary Potential: Student Perceptions of Wordwall Games

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ABSTRACT

While existing research on Wordwall frequently prioritizes pedagogical perspectives or quantitative test outcomes, the subjective experiences of learners remain underexplored. This qualitative descriptive study investigates how Indonesian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) young learners perceive and experience Wordwall gamification within the vocabulary learning process. Employing a qualitative descriptive method, data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with six eighth-grade students in Garut. The findings indicate that learners demonstrated a strong understanding of the platform, resulting in increased motivation and active participation. Observational data confirm that students exhibit higher focus and collaboration during gameplay compared to traditional sessions. Despite minor technical constraints, this study concludes that Wordwall successfully fosters an engaging, technology-supported learning environment aligned with the Merdeka Curriculum goals.

Keywords: *Wordwall, Vocabulary Learning, Student Perceptions*

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INTRODUCTION

In the era of globalization, English language proficiency has emerged as a critical factor in determining one's educational and professional opportunities. Beyond its function as a mere linguistic skill, proficiency in English has become a key determinant of educational and professional competitiveness in the global era (Rao, 2019). Yet, despite this necessity, mastering English remains a significant hurdle for many students in Indonesia. Recent data from the First (2024) places Indonesia in the "low proficiency" band, ranking 80th out of 116 countries. This struggle is most visible in vocabulary mastery, a fundamental component that Alqahtani (2015) asserts is the prerequisite for developing listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Nora et al., (2026) emphasize that vocabulary knowledge is a fundamental component of reading comprehension, playing a significant role in influencing reading performance. Without a sufficient vocabulary threshold, learners face formidable obstacles in comprehending texts and expressing ideas effectively.

The challenge of teaching vocabulary is particularly acute at the junior high school level, where students are in a transitional developmental phase requiring active engagement rather than passive reception. Unfortunately, conventional teaching methods in Indonesia often still rely heavily on rote memorization and teacher-centered instruction, which can lead to boredom and disengagement (Cahyono & Widiati, 2008). In this specific context, students frequently encounter difficulties related to spelling, pronunciation, and retrieving word meanings, especially when learning relies on repetitive drills without context (Urai & Nurnisa, 2020). Consequently, there is an urgent need for instructional innovation that aligns with the dynamic nature of young learners.

This need for innovation is further emphasized by the implementation of Indonesia's *Kurikulum Merdeka*, which demands a shift towards student autonomy, creativity, and the meaningful integration of technology in classrooms (Rahayu et al., 2022). In response to these

educational demands, Digital Game-Based Language Learning (DGBLL) has emerged as a transformative approach. Deterding et al., (2011) define gamification as the application of game design elements in non-game contexts to enhance user engagement. Specifically regarding vocabulary acquisition, the efficacy of this approach is grounded in the Dual Coding Theory (Paivio, 1986), which posits that learners retain information better when it is processed through both verbal and visual channels, a core feature of Wordwall which combines text with imagery. Furthermore, gamified platforms facilitate 'active recall' and 'spaced repetition,' mechanisms identified by Schmitt (2000) as essential for transferring vocabulary from short-term to long-term memory. Theoretically, the effectiveness of this approach is supported by the Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017), which suggests that gamified environments fulfill learners' intrinsic needs for autonomy and competence. Furthermore, the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989) posits that perceived usefulness and ease of use are the primary drivers determining learners' willingness to adopt digital tools.

Among the various digital platforms available, Wordwall has gained prominence as a versatile tool for vocabulary instruction. It allows educators to create customizable interactive games such as quizzes, match-ups, and anagrams. Empirical studies have consistently demonstrated its positive impact on learning outcomes. Recent scholarship in 2025 highlights a shift from general engagement to specific linguistic gains, often comparing Wordwall favorably against similar platforms like Kahoot! and Quizizz due to its wider variety of game templates. For instance, Ilahiyati et al., (2023) found that Wordwall significantly improves student enthusiasm and vocabulary retention. Supporting this, Pelangi et al., (2025) confirmed that gamified elements in Wordwall effectively enhanced students' motivation and classroom engagement in EFL contexts. Furthermore, recent studies have specifically investigated student perceptions. Bahauddin & Mustofa (2025) revealed that students perceived Wordwall as an 'exciting' and 'motivating' tool that transformed the classroom atmosphere. Similarly, Ulya et al., (2025) provided compelling evidence that students not only enjoyed the game but also perceived a tangible improvement in their ability to recall targeted vocabulary words. In addition, Erza et al., (2025) noted that the platform dramatically enhances acquisition by transforming static lessons into interactive experiences, while Nanda et al., (2025) documented positive perceptions among Indonesian students regarding its user-friendly interface.

However, the integration of such technology is not without hurdles. Practical challenges, such as unstable internet connections and unequal access to compatible devices, remain significant barriers to its widespread implementation in developing contexts (Khasyi, 2024). Moreover, despite the growing body of research on gamified learning, a significant gap remains in the literature. The majority of existing studies have been quantitative in nature, focusing heavily on measurable outcomes like test scores or survey statistics. Few investigations have qualitatively explored the "inner voice" of the learners specifically, how junior high school students personally understand, experience, and feel about using Wordwall in an authentic classroom setting.

To address this void, the present study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to explore students' perceptions of Wordwall games for vocabulary learning. By shifting the focus from numerical scores to the qualitative dimensions of student experience, this research seeks to provide deeper insights into the nuances of digital integration. Ultimately, the findings aim to offer practical recommendations for how digital tools can be effectively utilized to foster engagement and vocabulary mastery within the Indonesian English Language Teaching (ELT) context.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore students' perceptions and experiences of the use of Wordwall games in vocabulary learning. This design was considered appropriate because it enables a detailed and comprehensive description of the phenomenon as experienced by participants in their natural setting, without manipulating variables or establishing cause-and-effect relationships. Through this approach, the

researchers capture the subjective meanings, experiences, and attitudes of students regarding the integration of gamified learning in the classroom.

Participants

The participants in this study were six eighth-grade students from a junior high school in Garut Regency, West Java. The selection was conducted using a purposive sampling technique to ensure the data's richness and relevance. The participants were categorized based on their English achievement levels: (a) High-achieving students, (b) Average-achieving students, and (c) Low-achieving students. Two students were selected from each category to represent diverse perspectives and learning experiences regarding the use of Wordwall. Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to during the recruitment process. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from both the school administration and the participants. The students were assured that their participation was voluntary and that their identities would remain confidential. Consequently, pseudonyms (S1 to S6) were used throughout this report to maintain anonymity.

Data Collection Technique

Data collection was carried out through a rigorous process involving two complementary techniques. First, Observation was conducted during two scheduled English lessons. The researcher acted as a non-participant observer, utilizing a structured checklist to document students' real-time engagement, their interactions with the game features, and their behavioral responses to the competitive elements of Wordwall. Second, Semi-Structured Interviews were administered individually to the six selected participants after the lessons concluded. The interview guide comprised thirteen open-ended questions designed to probe three key dimensions: their cognitive knowledge of the platform, their affective learning experiences, and their overall attitude toward its use. Each interview session lasted approximately 15–20 minutes and was conducted in a quiet setting to ensure the students felt comfortable expressing their honest opinions. To avoid language barriers and ensure the depth of responses, the interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and subsequently translated into English for analysis. Prior to the main study, a pilot test was conducted to ensure the interview questions were clear and capable of eliciting meaningful responses.

Data Analysis Technique

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which allows for the systematic identification of patterns within qualitative data. The analysis involved several stages: (1) Familiarization, where interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and observation notes were reviewed. (2) Coding, where relevant data segments related to students' knowledge, experience, and attitude were labeled. (3) Theme Development, where codes were grouped into broader categories to identify recurring patterns. (4) Interpretation, where findings were synthesized to provide a comprehensive understanding of students' perceptions.

Research Validity and Trustworthiness

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study, methodological triangulation was applied. This involved comparing findings from different data sources, specifically by cross-referencing students' interview responses with observed classroom behaviors and documentation. Additionally, the research instruments underwent expert judgment prior to use, achieving a feasibility percentage of 89%, ensuring that the tools were valid and appropriate for the study's objectives.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Observation Results

The classroom observation results revealed that the implementation of Wordwall games created a dynamic and student-centered learning environment. Initially, students showed curiosity and excitement when the "Culinary and Me" topic was introduced through the platform. This enthusiasm transformed the classroom atmosphere from a traditional passive setting into an active and participatory one. During group activities on "Cooking Utensils," students collaborated effectively, repeating English words aloud to ensure accuracy, which

facilitated peer learning. The gamified features, such as leaderboards and timers, maintained student engagement, although minor technical issues like internet connectivity caused occasional delays. Despite these challenges, the overall atmosphere remained positive, fostering meaningful participation and collaboration.

Students' Knowledge of Wordwall

The data indicated that students possessed a fundamental understanding of Wordwall as an interactive educational tool. Most participants recognized that the platform functions not merely for entertainment but specifically to support vocabulary practice and review. Student S1 stated, "Wordwall is a website that can make learning fun because we can play while learning vocabulary." This reflects an awareness of the platform's dual role in combining play with learning. Furthermore, students like S3 and S4 demonstrated deeper cognitive understanding, noting that features such as matching games and immediate feedback helped them review words quickly. S4 emphasized, "We can see immediately if our answers are correct or not, so we learn faster."

Theoretically, this finding aligns with Schmitt (2000) theory of vocabulary acquisition, which posits that active use and retrieval are essential for retention. Students understood that the visual and auditory elements of Wordwall facilitated their comprehension, consistent with Paivio Dual Coding Theory (1986). Even students with limited prior knowledge, such as S6, quickly grasped its educational purpose after initial exposure, stating, "I realized it's for learning vocabulary and grammar through games." This transition from viewing Wordwall as a game to a learning tool marks a significant shift in their perception of educational technology.

Learning Experience Using Wordwall

Students reported overwhelmingly positive experiences, describing the learning process as engaging and distinct from traditional rote memorization. The competitive elements, such as points and time limits, were highlighted as key motivating factors. S2 noted, "I paid more attention to the words because I wanted to get the highest score. The pictures and colors also make me not sleepy compared to just reading the textbook." This resonates with Deterding et al., (2011), who argue that game mechanics increase engagement through challenge and reward systems. The immediate feedback feature was also crucial; S4 mentioned, "It helps me learn spelling and meaning faster because I can see and repeat the words many times." This supports Hattie & Timperley (2007) assertion that feedback is powerful for improving learning outcomes.

From an affective perspective, the digital environment provided a safe space for students to make mistakes without embarrassment, thereby reducing anxiety. As noted by S5, despite feeling panic due to time limits, the experience remained enjoyable. S5 enthusiastically remarked, "At first I was panic because of the timer, but then I laughed because it was just a game. I wasn't afraid to be wrong because my friends were also playing." This relates to Krashen (1982), where lower anxiety levels promote better acquisition. The collaborative nature of the activities also encouraged social interaction, consistent with Vygotsky (1978) sociocultural theory, as students discussed answers and supported each other during gameplay.

Students' Attitude toward Wordwall

The findings demonstrated a predominantly positive attitude toward Wordwall, with students perceiving it as an innovative medium that transformed the classroom atmosphere. S1 remarked, "Learning with Wordwall is more exciting than just writing in a notebook," indicating a preference for interactive over passive learning. This shift in attitude suggests that gamified tools can change students' mindset from viewing English as a chore to seeing it as an enjoyable activity. S3 expressed increased confidence, stating, "I feel more confident to answer because it's not embarrassing when I make mistakes."

This positive attitude fosters intrinsic motivation. S4 mentioned wanting to learn more words after playing, satisfying their curiosity. This aligns with Deci & Ryan (1985), where intrinsic motivation is key to sustained learning. Although some students like S6 noted technical hurdles like slow internet, their resilience was evident: "Even when the internet is

slow, I still enjoy playing because it helps me remember words.” Overall, the students' attitudes reflect a strong acceptance of technology-based learning, viewing it as a supportive and motivating component of their English education.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings, this study concludes that the integration of Wordwall games supports vocabulary learning in terms of fostering positive cognitive, experiential, and attitudinal responses among junior high school students. The results demonstrate that the platform transforms the classroom atmosphere from a passive routine into an active, student-centered environment where learners demonstrate high levels of engagement, enthusiasm, and collaboration. Students perceive Wordwall not merely as a source of entertainment but as a meaningful educational tool that facilitates vocabulary retention through visual aids, repetition, and immediate feedback. Despite these positive outcomes, this study acknowledges several limitations. First, the research involved a relatively small sample size of six students from a single junior high school in Garut, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to broader contexts. Second, the study focused primarily on students' perceptions without measuring the quantitative impact on their vocabulary retention scores. Additionally, minor technical challenges, such as internet instability, were identified as practical constraints during implementation. In light of these findings, several pedagogical implications are proposed. English teachers are encouraged to integrate gamified platforms like Wordwall not only as an ice-breaking activity but as a core reinforcement tool to solidify vocabulary retention in a low-anxiety environment. These findings also support the objectives of the *Merdeka Curriculum* in promoting digital literacy and creative learning. Consequently, future researchers are encouraged to conduct longitudinal studies with larger sample sizes and mixed-method designs to further validate the long-term efficacy of digital game-based learning in diverse educational contexts.

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