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TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES ON INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES USING VOCABULARY GAMES TO SUPPORT GRADE FIVE ENGLISH LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

This study explored teachers' perspectives on instructional strategies using vocabulary games to support Grade Five English learners. Grounded in a qualitative phenomenological design, the research examined the lived experiences of teachers, their adaptive practices, and the insights gained in implementing game-based vocabulary instruction. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with Grade Five English teachers from public elementary schools in Davao City and analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings revealed that vocabulary games serve as an engaging instructional approach that enhances learner motivation, participation, and vocabulary retention. Teachers reported that integrating games promotes active learning, collaborative interaction, and contextualized language use, contributing to improved comprehension and communicative competence. However, several challenges were identified, including large class sizes, limited instructional time, insufficient resources, and varying learner proficiency levels. To address these constraints, teachers employed adaptive strategies such as differentiating game difficulty, utilizing low-resource materials, integrating short game segments, and linking game outcomes to academic tasks. The study further highlighted that vocabulary games function not only as instructional tools but also as formative assessment mechanisms that allow continuous monitoring of learners' progress. Overall, the findings underscore the value of game-based learning in fostering an interactive and learner-centered classroom environment. The study recommends strengthened teacher training, provision of adequate resources, and institutional support to maximize the effectiveness of vocabulary games in English instruction.

KEYWORDS: *Vocabulary Games, Game-Based Learning, Learner Engagement, Vocabulary Retention, Instructional Adaptations*

1. INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

Vocabulary acquisition remains a foundational pillar of language proficiency, directly impacting reading comprehension, oral communication, and literacy development. In contemporary elementary education, particularly within intermediate levels like Grade Five, learners transition toward complex semantic and textual demands, requiring robust lexical stores. However, traditional educational approaches frequently emphasize rote memorization and textbook-driven instruction, which often lead to surface-level processing, limited conceptual retention, and classroom disengagement.

In the broader Southeast Asian region, similar lexical developments and pedagogical shifts have been documented. For instance, in Thailand and Singapore, researchers note that textbook-centered vocabulary drills struggle to cultivate authentic word contextualization, resulting in gaps between receptive and productive vocabulary. In Cambodia, challenges are amplified by large class sizes, insufficient professional training in modern interactive strategies, and institutional constraints prioritizing grammatical mechanics over interactive lexical scaffolding.

Within the Philippine basic education context, teachers face distinctive structural and socio-linguistic realities. In urban schools across Metro Manila, Cebu, and Quezon City, the integration of instructional vocabulary games—such as word relays, matching tasks, and vocabulary wheels—has shown considerable potential in neutralizing learner passivity and enhancing engagement. Yet, educators frequently contend with structural hurdles, including dense K-to-12 curriculum requirements, severe classroom resource limitations, and varying learner proficiency levels.

In Davao City, public elementary classrooms reveal critical contextual gaps. Overcrowded classrooms constrain the implementation of interactive strategies, making it difficult for teachers to effectively monitor individual progress or manage active game dynamics without disrupting general classroom order. Furthermore, the linguistic landscape is highly fluid; learners frequently resort to code-switching into Cebuano or Taglish during interactive activities. While this supports immediate peer comprehension, it simultaneously curtails sustained exposure to authentic English language targets. Given these interconnected educational dynamics, there is an urgent need to examine how public elementary school teachers construct, implement, and adapt game-based vocabulary instruction.

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Purpose of the Study

The primary objective of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore teachers' perspectives on instructional strategies that utilize vocabulary games to support Grade Five English learners. Specifically, it sought to capture the lived experiences of educators navigating the benefits, pedagogical configurations, and operational bottlenecks of game-based teaching. Additionally, the study targeted the coping mechanisms, instructional adaptations, and professional insights developed by teachers to align these activities with the practical realities of the Philippine public school classroom.

Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of Grade Five teachers when using vocabulary games to support English learners in their classrooms?
2. How do teachers cope with challenges and adapt their instructional strategies when implementing vocabulary games for English learners?
3. What educational insights do teachers gain from using vocabulary games to enhance the vocabulary acquisition of Grade Five English learners?

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Game-Based Learning and Vocabulary Acquisition

Integrating educational games within second language acquisition (SLA) frameworks creates highly interactive settings that enhance both motivation and semantic durability. Traditional methods of teaching vocabulary typically decouple terms from structural language pathways, causing quick cognitive fatigue and superficial retention. In contrast, game-based models provide recurring, low-anxiety exposure to targeted lexicons within purposeful instructional frameworks. Empirical studies emphasize that when vocabulary items are situated inside communicative tasks—such as matching drills, puzzle boards, or competitive team runs—learners process lexical properties deeply, promoting natural cognitive consolidation.

Overcoming Affective Barriers

A key advantage of game-based learning is its capacity to lower the affective filter. Second-language learners often demonstrate high anxiety levels due to a fear of public failure, phonetic errors, or negative peer evaluations. By embedding language practice inside a structured play environment, games shift the focal core from explicit language assessment to social collaboration and rule-guided competition. Mistakes are naturally reframed as common steps within the mechanics of play, encouraging low-performing students to communicate with greater confidence and enthusiasm.

The Role of Contextualization

Contextualized instruction links abstract lexical units to relatable situations, prompting learners to build meaning using prior schematic knowledge. Research indicates that teaching vocabulary words as isolated elements does not foster productive communication skills. Game-based designs facilitate contextualization by requiring students to immediately apply discovered words within sentences, thematic narratives, or peer-driven challenges to advance in the game. This method bridges the gap between receptive vocabulary identification and active textual production.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological research design to investigate the central phenomenon. Phenomenology allows researchers to explore human experiences to describe how individuals construct meaning around specific events or instructional practices. By adopting this approach, the study captured the detailed realities of public school teachers as they implement vocabulary games, manage classroom settings, and innovate within structurally constrained environments.

Philosophical and Qualitative Assumptions

- **Ontology:** This study recognized multiple subjective realities constructed by Grade Five English teachers. These diverse pedagogical experiences were captured directly through the participants' own words, avoiding data fabrication or external manipulation.
- **Epistemology:** The researcher maintained a close relationship with the data, utilizing shared backgrounds in elementary language instruction to co-construct deep understandings during interview interactions.
- **Axiology:** All subjective disclosures were treated with equal worth. Personal biases were continuously bracketed using reflective memos, ensuring that the final findings strictly represent the authentic voices of the participants.

Research Participants and Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to select Grade Five English teachers from public elementary schools in Davao City. The essential criteria required participants to have direct, hands-on experience utilizing vocabulary games within their formal elementary reading and language classes. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was achieved, ensuring that further interviews yielded no new conceptual insights.

Ethical Considerations

Strict ethical standards were maintained by aligning all procedures with the core values of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. Formal approval was secured from the institutional Research Ethics Committee. Comprehensive informed consent was gathered prior to data collection, and participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty. To protect personal identities and school reputations, alphanumeric codes and pseudonyms were applied across all transcripts. Textual materials and audio recordings were safely secured in encrypted, password-protected cloud storage.

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Data Collection Procedure

Data collection relied on semi-structured in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). The researcher used a validated interview guide that allowed flexibility to probe emerging disclosures. Due to schedule variations, sessions were held either in-person or via secure virtual platforms. To preserve transcript integrity, all audio tracks were recorded with explicit consent and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

The transcribed texts were analyzed using an inductive thematic approach. The step-by-step framework included:

1. *Verbatim Transcription:* Converting all audio tracks into clean, digitized text.
2. *Data Familiarization:* Repeatedly reading the text to isolate initial analytical impressions.
3. *Initial Coding:* Labeling meaningful segments based on specific strategies, challenges, or behaviors.
4. *Theme Development:* Clumping related codes into distinct sub-themes and macro-level thematic categories.
5. *Member Checking:* Returning the synthesized findings to the participants to verify interpretive accuracy and preserve confirmability.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Lived Experiences of Teachers in Using Vocabulary Games

The first research objective focused on documenting the lived experiences of Grade Five educators. The thematic analysis revealed that while vocabulary games serve as powerful tools for enhancing classroom engagement, their execution remains complicated by severe operational and behavioral obstacles.

Enhancing Motivation and Active Learning

Teachers observed a significant shift in classroom engagement when traditional vocabulary lectures were replaced with game-based configurations. Passive behavior dropped as students actively engaged in competitive or collaborative peer tasks. One participant noted:

"I noticed that when we start the lesson with a quick word game, even the students who usually sit quietly at the back begin to raise their hands. It changes the energy of the room entirely."

This shift aligns with constructivist learning principles, which assert that knowledge acquisition is maximized when learners actively manipulate symbols and language elements within a shared social space.

Structural and Logistical Bottlenecks

Despite high engagement, teachers consistently reported challenges related to large class sizes and compressed instructional timelines. Managing forty to fifty students during high-energy games often led to noise complaints or lost instructional time. Another participant explained:

"Our class hours are very tight. By the time I set up the rules and group the students, half the period is gone. If the class is too noisy, it affects the neighboring rooms."

These findings match observations from broader public school studies, which show that crowded urban classrooms frequently limit the consistent use of student-centered activities due to physical space constraints and management difficulties.

Theme 2: Coping Mechanisms and Instructional Adaptations

To maintain the effectiveness of game-based instruction despite these constraints, teachers developed several creative coping mechanisms and practical adaptations.

Micro-Segment Integration and Low-Resource Innovation

Rather than dedicating entire periods to games, teachers adapted by using short game blocks lasting five to ten minutes, strategically placed at the start or end of a lesson. Furthermore, due to limited digital infrastructure and lack of commercial materials, teachers relied heavily on improvised materials. A teacher shared:

"We cannot rely on projector screens or digital apps because of limited equipment. So, I make my own flashcards, word pockets, and drawing boards from scrap materials. It takes time, but it works."

This resourcefulness demonstrates the high professional adaptability of public school teachers, who find ways to create engaging lessons despite limited institutional funding.

Strategic Scaffolding and Targeted Grouping

To handle wide differences in student language proficiency, teachers avoided random grouping. Instead, they designed mixed-ability teams where higher-performing students could support peers with lower language skills. Game rules were also adjusted, starting with simple word recognition before moving to complex sentence construction. This approach mirrors Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where targeted peer interaction helps bridge learning gaps and build individual confidence.

Theme 3: Educational Insights Gained by Teachers

The final research question explored the professional insights educators gained over time from using vocabulary games in their classrooms.

Shift from Rote Learning to Contextualized Use

Teachers realized that while rote memorization helps students pass immediate spelling quizzes, it does not lead to long-term vocabulary retention or practical language use. Games provided the context needed to help students understand how words function within real communication. One participant reflected:

"I used to think that writing a word ten times on paper was enough. But games proved to me that students only truly learn a word when they have to use it to achieve a goal with their peers."

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This insight highlights the value of communicative language teaching, where language elements are learned through active, meaningful use rather than isolated drills.

Games as Formative Assessment Tools

Another major insight was recognizing that vocabulary games double as real-time formative assessment tools. By observing students during play, teachers could immediately spot common mispronunciations, grammatical errors, and comprehension gaps without the pressure of a formal test. This allowed teachers to give immediate, supportive feedback, reinforcing correct language habits right away.

5. IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Pedagogical Implications

The findings offer clear practical lessons for language instruction. First, vocabulary games should not be viewed as extra, isolated activities used only when time allows. Instead, they should be intentionally built into daily lesson plans to support active student engagement. Second, teachers need to move away from old, memorization-heavy tasks and focus on creating context-rich activities. This ensures that vocabulary learning directly improves reading, writing, and speaking skills.

Institutional and Policy Implications

For these strategies to succeed long-term, school administrators must provide better structural support. This includes organizing targeted professional development workshops focused on managing game-based learning in large classrooms. Additionally, school districts should allocate resources to create and distribute low-cost, durable game kits, reducing the workload on teachers who currently make these materials themselves.

Future Research Directions

Future studies could expand on these findings by using quantitative or mixed-method designs to measure exactly how much vocabulary games improve student test scores over time. It would also be valuable to explore how digital game platforms could be used in schools with better technology access, or how game-based strategies can be adapted for students with special learning needs.

6. CONCLUSION

This qualitative phenomenological study highlights the valuable role vocabulary games play in intermediate elementary language instruction. The findings show that game-based learning successfully boosts student motivation, lowers language anxiety, and encourages active learning. While public school teachers face tough structural challenges—like large class sizes, limited time, and scarce resources—their creative instructional adaptations ensure that vocabulary games remain highly effective tools. Moving forward, providing stronger institutional support, dedicated teacher training, and better classroom resources will be essential to fully maximize the power of game-based learning and improve language outcomes for intermediate English learners.

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