

Teaching English Vocabulary to Young Learners: An ESL Approach with Scouting Themes

Wiwiek Meisuri^{1*}, Aqila Adha Br Tanjung², Karina Salsabila Hasim³, Martha Carolina Sinaga⁴, Reinhard Panjaitan⁵, Shinta Martha Delima Lumban Gao⁶

¹⁻⁶Universitas Negeri Medan, Indonesia

Email: meisuriw@yahoo.com¹, aqilatanjung1901@gmail.com², karinahasim19@gmail.com³, marthasinaga18@gmail.com⁴, reinhardrendisonang@gmail.com⁵, shintamartha07maret2005@gmail.com⁶

*Corresponding Author: meisuriw@yahoo.com

Abstract. Teaching English vocabulary to young learners requires engaging and structured instructional methods to enhance retention and practical usage. This study explores the effectiveness of Thematic-Based Learning (TBL) in teaching scouting-related vocabulary to elementary school students. Over five teaching sessions, students were introduced to scouting objects, ranks, nature words, simple commands, and camping activities through structured activities such as verbal repetition, Q&A exercises, and board-based word matching tasks. The study focused on three key aspects: (1) vocabulary retention, (2) vocabulary usage in communication, and (3) student motivation and engagement. Findings indicate that students retained words more effectively when they were concrete and visually relatable, whereas abstract terms and multi-word expressions were more challenging to remember. Students demonstrated strong word recognition but struggled to use the vocabulary in full sentences, highlighting the need for additional communicative reinforcement. Motivation levels varied, with higher engagement observed in familiar, action-based topics, whereas more abstract vocabulary led to lower participation and classroom management challenges. This research confirms that Thematic-Based Learning is a valuable approach for young learners in ESL vocabulary instruction, but additional strategies—such as structured speaking exercises and extended reinforcement activities—are necessary to bridge the gap between memorization and practical application. The findings contribute to the ongoing discussion on effective ESL vocabulary teaching strategies and suggest avenues for future studies to explore more interactive and multimodal approaches to vocabulary acquisition.

Keywords: TBL, Vocabulary Acquisition, Young Learners.

1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) to young learners presents unique challenges, particularly in helping students acquire and retain new vocabulary. Traditional ESL methods often emphasize rote memorization and isolated word lists, which can make learning less engaging and less effective for children (Cameron, 2001). Research suggests that young learners benefit more from thematic and context-based approaches, where vocabulary is introduced in meaningful and familiar contexts (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Thematic-Based Learning (TBL) has been widely recognized as an effective method for improving vocabulary retention and engagement in ESL classrooms (Nation, 2001).

One thematic approach that has not been widely explored is using scouting-related vocabulary to teach English to elementary school students. Scouting is an activity that many young learners are familiar with, making it a relatable and meaningful context for language learning. Studies have shown that when students learn vocabulary related to topics they already

understand, they develop stronger memory associations and higher retention rates (Schmitt, 2000). By integrating scouting-related vocabulary—such as scouting objects, ranks, nature words, commands, and camping activities—into ESL instruction, students are expected to develop a better understanding of new words and feel more confident using them in conversation.

Despite the potential benefits of thematic vocabulary instruction, several challenges arise when teaching English to young learners. First, students often struggle to retain vocabulary when words are taught without context (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001). Many ESL learners, especially children, find it difficult to recall words if they are presented as isolated terms rather than within a meaningful framework. Second, pronunciation difficulties can hinder students' confidence in speaking. Words that do not have phonetic equivalents in their first language can be particularly challenging to articulate correctly (Nation, 2001). Third, student participation varies, with some students actively engaging while others remain hesitant due to a lack of confidence. In our teaching sessions, we observed that some students became overly dependent on repetition drills, while others needed additional motivation to practice speaking independently.

Furthermore, classroom management posed another challenge. As the lessons progressed, students became more comfortable but also more difficult to control, particularly when they were excited about certain activities. Younger students, in particular, had shorter attention spans, requiring constant adaptation of teaching methods to maintain engagement. Additionally, since our lessons relied solely on whiteboard explanations and verbal drills without visual media, some students found it difficult to retain new vocabulary without additional reinforcement tools.

Several studies have explored different methods to enhance vocabulary learning in young learners. A study by Anggraini (2021) examined the effectiveness of using Electronic Word Guessing Games to teach English vocabulary. The study found that interactive games helped improve students' engagement, pronunciation, and vocabulary retention. The results showed an increase in students' vocabulary mastery, with the mean pre-test score rising from 6.00 to 7.50 in the post-test. The research concluded that using interactive digital tools makes learning more enjoyable and effective for young learners.

However, our study takes a different approach. Unlike Anggraini's (2021) research, which relied on technology-based games, we focused on a non-digital, classroom-based approach using thematic vocabulary instruction with verbal interaction and writing exercises on the whiteboard. Our goal was to determine whether teaching vocabulary through structured

thematic lessons—without the aid of multimedia—could still be effective in enhancing vocabulary retention and speaking confidence.

By comparing our observations with previous studies, this research seeks to analyze:

- 1) How thematic-based vocabulary instruction influences retention and recall among young learners.
- 2) Whether students can apply the learned vocabulary beyond memorization and use it in simple communication.
- 3) The impact of this approach on student motivation and classroom engagement.

Given the growing interest in alternative vocabulary teaching strategies, this study provides insights into the feasibility of scouting-themed ESL instruction in a non-formal educational setting. By analyzing student engagement, learning outcomes, and teaching challenges, we aim to contribute to the ongoing discussion on effective vocabulary acquisition techniques for young ESL learners.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Thematic-Based Learning in ESL Vocabulary Instruction

Vocabulary acquisition plays a crucial role in second language learning, particularly for young learners who require structured and engaging teaching methods to enhance retention and comprehension. Thematic-Based Learning (TBL) has been widely recognized as an effective approach to vocabulary instruction, as it organizes words into meaningful and connected groups, making it easier for students to remember them (Nation, 2001; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Research suggests that when vocabulary is introduced within a familiar and relatable theme, students develop stronger cognitive associations, leading to better retention and recall (Schmitt, 2000).

A study by Nation (2001) found that semantic clustering—grouping words based on a common theme—helps students retain vocabulary more effectively than when words are taught in isolation. Similarly, Richards and Rodgers (2001) emphasized that contextualized vocabulary instruction improves engagement and memory, as students can connect new words to real-world experiences.

In the context of young learners, Cameron (2001) highlights that children acquire language more efficiently when lessons are interactive and related to their interests. Since scouting is an activity that many elementary students are familiar with, using scouting-related vocabulary provides a relevant and engaging framework for ESL instruction. However, while

Thematic-Based Learning (TBL) improves retention, some studies argue that it must be supplemented with reinforcement activities to ensure long-term learning (Schmitt, 2000).

Intentional vs. Incidental Vocabulary Learning

Vocabulary learning can occur through incidental exposure (learning words naturally through interaction) or intentional instruction (explicit teaching of words with structured activities). Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) argue that intentional vocabulary learning leads to better short-term retention, as students are given direct explanations, repetitions, and targeted exercises. In contrast, incidental learning happens when students acquire new words through natural communication and exposure, which may lead to stronger long-term retention but requires extensive input.

Since this study focuses on explicitly teaching scouting-related vocabulary in a classroom setting, it falls under intentional vocabulary learning. Students were introduced to new words through structured exercises, such as verbal repetition, Q&A activities, and board-based matching exercises, which align with the principles of intentional learning strategies (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001). However, because the lessons were not conducted in a real scouting environment, students lacked incidental learning opportunities, which may have limited their ability to use the words naturally in conversation.

Challenges in Teaching Vocabulary to Young Learners

While Thematic-Based Learning (TBL) and Intentional Learning are effective, research highlights several challenges in teaching vocabulary to young learners. Schmitt (2000) states that passive recognition of vocabulary (knowing a word when seen or heard) develops before active usage (being able to use the word in speech or writing). This means that while students may be able to recall words in structured activities, they might still struggle to incorporate them into spontaneous conversation.

Pronunciation is another key challenge in ESL vocabulary instruction. Nation (2001) found that students often face phonetic difficulties when learning words that do not exist in their first language. In our study, some students hesitated to say certain words aloud due to unfamiliar sounds, which aligns with previous findings that suggest explicit pronunciation drills and repeated practice are essential for oral proficiency.

Additionally, student motivation plays a significant role in vocabulary learning outcomes. Richards and Rodgers (2001) state that students are more engaged when vocabulary is linked to their real-world experiences. However, our observations align with research by

Cameron (2001), which suggests that young learners have shorter attention spans and may lose interest if the vocabulary is too abstract or not immediately useful in their daily lives.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed Thematic-Based Learning (TBL) as the primary approach to teaching English vocabulary to elementary school students. The goal was to examine whether introducing vocabulary through a familiar theme—scouting—enhanced students' retention, recognition, and engagement. A qualitative action research methodology was used, focusing on classroom observations and teacher reflections to assess student learning progress.

The participants in this study were 16 students from Tuasan's State Elementary School 060875, all of whom were in primary school and had limited prior exposure to English. The lessons were conducted over five sessions, each introducing different categories of scouting-related vocabulary, including scouting objects, ranks, nature words, basic commands, and camping activities.

Teaching Procedure :

The learning process followed a structured yet interactive approach where students were introduced to new vocabulary using verbal explanations, repetition drills, matching exercises, and board-based learning activities. The teaching procedure was divided into three phases:

Introduction & Vocabulary Presentation – Students were introduced to scouting-related vocabulary through written and spoken explanations. The instructor provided translations and examples to help students grasp the meaning of new words.

Practice & Reinforcement – Students engaged in various oral and written exercises, including matching words, structured Q&A, and word recall activities to strengthen their understanding.

Assessment & Reflection – The instructor observed student participation and noted their ability to recall and use vocabulary in structured classroom exercises. Student engagement levels were also assessed based on their willingness to participate in board-writing tasks and verbal activities.

4. RESULT & DISCUSSIONS

Vocabulary acquisition is a fundamental aspect of ESL instruction, particularly for young learners who require structured and engaging methods to retain new words. One approach that has been widely explored in language education is Thematic-Based Learning (TBL), which suggests that vocabulary is best learned when introduced within a meaningful and familiar context (Nation, 2001; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Additionally, intentional vocabulary learning, as proposed by Laufer & Hulstijn (2001), emphasizes that young learners benefit from structured, direct vocabulary instruction rather than relying on incidental exposure. Schmitt (2000) further argues that for vocabulary to be effectively acquired, students must actively use the words in speech and writing rather than merely recognizing them in isolation.

This study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of scouting-themed vocabulary instruction in an ESL setting by analyzing three key aspects: (1) vocabulary retention, (2) vocabulary usage, and (3) student motivation. The data for this analysis was derived from classroom observations and teaching reflections recorded across five teaching sessions.

Vocabulary Retention in Thematic-Based Learning

One of the main arguments supporting thematic-based learning is that students are more likely to remember words when they are taught in thematically related groups rather than as isolated vocabulary lists (Nation, 2001). Our classroom observations revealed that retention varied depending on the complexity of the vocabulary and its familiarity to students. In Meeting 1 (Scouting Objects) and Meeting 3 (Nature Vocabulary), students exhibited strong retention of words such as tent, rope, tree, and river because they were already familiar with these objects in their first language. The repetition techniques used, including verbal repetition and interactive games, helped reinforce memory, and by the end of these sessions, most students could recall at least three to four words without assistance.

However, retention proved to be more challenging in Meeting 2 (Scouting Ranks & Terms) and Meeting 5 (Camping Activities), where students encountered more abstract or less commonly used words such as Intermediate Scout and Set up a tent. Without the aid of visual materials, students had difficulty forming mental associations for these words, leading to lower retention rates. By Meeting 5, several students had already forgotten some of the terms learned in earlier sessions, suggesting that additional reinforcement strategies were needed. This aligns with Schmitt's (2000) findings that high-frequency, easily visualized words tend to be retained more effectively than abstract or multi-word expressions.

Vocabulary Usage and Application in Communication

While retention is a crucial aspect of vocabulary learning, true acquisition occurs when students can actively use the words in communication (Schmitt, 2000). Throughout the five teaching sessions, it became evident that recognizing and repeating words was easier for students than using them in sentences. In Meeting 4 (Simple Scouting Phrases), students were able to repeat and respond to basic commands such as Let's go!, Help me!, and Stop! With ease. These expressions were short, action-based, and familiar, making them easier to understand and apply in real-life situations. However, in Meeting 2 (Scouting Ranks & Terms) and Meeting 5 (Camping Activities), students struggled to use longer phrases like Make a fire or Set up a tent in spontaneous speech.

Many students demonstrated a reliance on memorization rather than contextual understanding. When prompted with a word, they could often repeat it correctly, but when asked to use it in a sentence, they hesitated or required additional prompting. Pronunciation difficulties also played a role in limiting usage, particularly with words that contained unfamiliar phonetic structures. This supports Schmitt's (2000) argument that passive vocabulary recognition develops before active vocabulary use, meaning that structured speaking activities are essential for moving beyond memorization.

Thematic Learning and Student Motivation

One of the primary advantages of thematic-based learning is its potential to increase student engagement and motivation (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). By using a familiar theme, such as scouting, the lessons were expected to be more engaging for students. However, motivation levels varied across sessions depending on the complexity and relatability of the vocabulary. In Meeting 3 (Nature Vocabulary) and Meeting 4 (Simple Scouting Phrases), students were highly engaged because the vocabulary was easy to visualize and connected to everyday experiences. Interactive elements, such as writing on the board and role-play exercises, encouraged participation and created a dynamic classroom environment. Some students even requested to repeat certain activities, indicating genuine enthusiasm for learning.

However, motivation levels declined in Meeting 2 (Scouting Ranks & Terms), where the vocabulary was more abstract and less personally relevant. Students showed lower engagement and required more encouragement to participate in activities. Additionally, by Meeting 5 (Camping Activities), some students became overly comfortable and difficult to manage, leading to classroom control challenges. This supports Richards & Rodgers' (2001)

assertion that thematic learning is most effective when the vocabulary is directly relevant to students' real-world experiences.

Summary of Findings

The results of this study suggest that thematic-based vocabulary instruction was effective in improving retention and engagement, but additional strategies are needed to facilitate active usage in communication.

Vocabulary Retention: Students retained concrete, familiar words more easily than abstract terms or multi-word expressions.

Vocabulary Usage: Recognition and repetition were successful, but students struggled to use words in sentences without structured speaking practice.

Student Motivation: Engagement was highest when vocabulary was directly linked to students' experiences, but abstract words led to lower motivation and classroom management challenges.

These findings indicate that while thematic-based learning is a valuable tool in ESL instruction, it should be supplemented with additional reinforcement techniques such as pronunciation drills, structured sentence-building activities, and continued exposure to vocabulary over multiple lessons.

Conclusion of Results & Discussion

The implementation of scouting-themed vocabulary instruction in this study demonstrated that context-based learning improves vocabulary retention and engagement. However, active vocabulary usage remains a challenge, suggesting the need for more structured speaking practice and reinforcement techniques.

While Thematic-Based Learning (TBL) proved beneficial in making vocabulary lessons more engaging, the effectiveness of this method could be further enhanced by incorporating more structured communicative exercises. The findings align with previous research by Nation (2001) and Schmitt (2000), which highlight the importance of context, repetition, and interactive learning strategies in vocabulary acquisition.

Future studies could explore how additional reinforcement strategies—such as multimedia support, storytelling, or peer conversations—might enhance the effectiveness of thematic vocabulary instruction for young ESL learners.

5. CONCLUSION

This study explored the effectiveness of thematic-based vocabulary instruction in an ESL classroom setting by introducing scouting-related vocabulary to young learners. The primary objective was to determine whether teaching English vocabulary through a familiar theme would enhance retention, usage, and student motivation. Over five teaching sessions, students were introduced to scouting objects, ranks, nature vocabulary, simple commands, and camping activities, using a structured yet interactive learning approach. The findings suggest that Thematic-Based Learning (TBL) effectively aids vocabulary retention, particularly for words that are familiar and easy to visualize. Students showed stronger recall for words directly related to their real-world experiences, such as tent, tree, and river. However, more abstract or multi-word expressions like Intermediate Scout and Set up a tent were more difficult to retain, highlighting the need for additional reinforcement strategies such as visual aids or repeated exposure over time.

In terms of vocabulary usage, while students were able to recognize and repeat the words effectively, they faced difficulties incorporating them into full sentences. Short, action-based phrases like Let's go! And Help me! were easier for students to use in spoken interactions, whereas longer phrases required more structured practice to be effectively applied. These findings align with Schmitt (2000), who emphasized that passive vocabulary recognition develops before active usage, meaning that students need additional communicative exercises to transition from memorization to practical application. Student motivation and engagement were also significantly influenced by the complexity and relatability of the vocabulary. Lessons that focused on familiar, action-based words (e.g., nature words, commands) led to higher participation and enthusiasm, while more abstract lessons (e.g., scouting ranks) saw lower engagement levels. Additionally, as students became more comfortable, classroom management became a challenge, reinforcing the importance of structured activities to maintain focus.

Future research could further explore how thematic learning can be combined with communicative activities to bridge the gap between word recognition and practical language use. Additionally, investigating the long-term retention of vocabulary taught through thematic instruction could provide deeper insights into its lasting effectiveness. By understanding how young learners acquire vocabulary in a structured thematic environment, this study contributes to the ongoing development of effective ESL teaching methodologies for elementary students.

REFERENCE

- Anggraini, A. (2021). Teaching English vocabulary for young learners using electronic word guessing games. *Journal of English Language Studies*, 5(2), 206–214. <https://doi.org/10.29408/veles.v5i2.3873>
- Bryfonski, L., & McKay, P. (2017). Task-based language teaching (TBLT) for English language learners: Principles and practices. In *Foundational Principles of Task-Based Language Teaching* (pp. 45–60).
- Dégi, Zs., & Asztalos, A. (2021). Scouts' and educational stakeholders' perceptions of integrating scouting methods into formal education. *Central European Journal of Educational Research*, 3(2), 98–109. <https://doi.org/10.37441/cejerr/2021/3/2/9365>
- Garton, S., & Copland, F. (2019). *The Routledge handbook of teaching English to young learners*. Routledge.
- Halliwell, S. (1992). *Teaching English in the primary classroom*. Longman.
- Lightbown, P. M., & Spada, N. (2020). *How languages are learned* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Linse, C. T. (2005). *Practical English language teaching: Young learners*. McGraw-Hill.
- Moon, J. (2005). *Children learning English: A guidebook for English language teachers*. Macmillan.
- Nation, P. (2022). The role of context in vocabulary learning and retention. *Languages*, 9(5), 160. <https://doi.org/10.3390/languages9050160>
- Nunan, D. (2011). *Teaching English to young learners*. Anaheim University Press.
- Pinter, A. (2017). *Teaching young language learners* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Richards, J. C. (2006). *Communicative language teaching today*. Cambridge University Press. <https://www.professorjackrichards.com/wp-content/uploads/Richards-Communicative-Language.pdf>
- Saad, S., Abdullah, A., & Mansor, N. S. (2024). Empowering ESL learners: The role of fun language activities in developing autonomous learning in highly immersive programs. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 8(9), 42–53.
- Shin, J. K., & Crandall, J. (2014). *Teaching young learners English: From theory to practice*. National Geographic Learning.
- Wright, A. (1995). *Storytelling with children*. Oxford University Press.