

# Role of Activity-Based Learning in Vocabulary Development among Young ESL Learners

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**Abstract** — Vocabulary is an essential part of second-language learning, but young ESL learners may find traditional memorisation-based vocabulary learning difficult. Activity-Based Learning (ABL) provides a learner-centred approach through games, storytelling, role-play, pictures, songs and real-life activities. This paper examines the role of ABL in developing vocabulary among young ESL learners through a qualitative review of relevant literature. The findings suggest that ABL can improve vocabulary recognition, recall, retention and meaningful use while increasing learners' motivation and participation. However, effective ABL requires clear learning objectives, repetition, teacher guidance, suitable activities and proper assessment. The study concludes that ABL is a useful approach for vocabulary development when activities are age-appropriate, purposeful and connected to specific vocabulary outcomes.

**Keywords**— Activity-Based Learning, vocabulary development, young ESL learners, vocabulary acquisition, English language teaching, game-based learning, learner-centred pedagogy, primary education.

## I. INTRODUCTION

English has become an important language of education, communication and employment in many parts of the world. As a result, English is increasingly introduced during the early years of schooling. For young learners, however, learning English is not simply a matter of memorising grammatical rules or lists of words. Children need opportunities to encounter, understand, remember and use new vocabulary in meaningful situations.

Vocabulary occupies a central position in second-language development. Without sufficient vocabulary, learners may experience difficulty in understanding spoken and written English and in expressing their own ideas. Vocabulary knowledge therefore provides an important foundation for the development of other language skills. Research on primary-school learners emphasises that vocabulary acquisition is particularly important during the early stages of

English learning because learners initially build their language knowledge through individual words before progressing towards more complex phrases and sentences (Yieng & Abdul Aziz, 2022).

Despite its importance, vocabulary is often taught through traditional methods such as word lists, repetition, translation and copying. Although these techniques can sometimes support initial recognition, they may provide limited opportunities for learners to encounter words in meaningful contexts or use them actively. Young learners may also lose interest when vocabulary lessons become repetitive and disconnected from their experiences.

Activity-Based Learning (ABL) offers a learner-centred alternative. ABL involves learning through purposeful participation in activities. In an English classroom, learners may acquire vocabulary through games, songs, stories, picture cards, objects, role-play, drawing, matching, puzzles, classroom surveys and real-life simulations. Instead of merely receiving vocabulary from the teacher, learners encounter words while performing actions, solving problems, interacting with classmates and completing meaningful tasks.

Sinha (2023), in a study of ABL for young ESL learners, highlights the usefulness of practical examples, real-life situations, role-play, songs, worksheets, props, photographs and illustrations in making English language learning more meaningful for children.

Recent literature specifically examining young EFL learners' vocabulary acquisition also reports positive associations

between interactive approaches and vocabulary learning. A thematic review of studies published between 2018 and 2025 found that storytelling, realia, game-based activities and technology-supported tools can contribute to vocabulary learning, retention and motivation among young learners.

### Need and Significance of the Study

The need for the present study arises from the important role of vocabulary in second-language learning and the difficulties young ESL learners may experience when vocabulary is taught mainly through memorisation, translation and repetitive written exercises. Vocabulary learning involves not only knowing the meaning of words but also recognising, remembering, pronouncing and using them appropriately in different contexts. Therefore, young learners need repeated exposure to new words through meaningful and enjoyable experiences. Activity-Based Learning (ABL) can provide these opportunities through games, storytelling, songs, role-play, picture matching, realia, puzzles and classroom interaction. These activities can make vocabulary learning more active, meaningful and easier to remember by connecting new words with actions, images and real-life situations. The study is significant because it can help teachers understand how ABL can be used purposefully for vocabulary development rather than simply as classroom entertainment. It may also increase learners' participation, motivation and confidence while giving teachers practical strategies for teaching vocabulary. Furthermore, many ABL activities can be conducted with simple and low-cost materials, making the approach suitable for different school settings, including classrooms with limited resources.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### 1. Vocabulary Development among Young ESL Learners

Vocabulary development is the process of learning word meanings, pronunciation, forms and appropriate usage. For young ESL learners, vocabulary is important because it forms the foundation of basic English communication. Children generally learn words more effectively when they are connected with pictures, objects, actions and real-life experiences. Interactive approaches such as games, storytelling and realia can support vocabulary learning, retention and motivation.

### 2. Activity-Based Learning and Vocabulary Acquisition

Activity-Based Learning (ABL) encourages learners to acquire vocabulary through active participation rather than memorisation alone. Activities such as picture matching, guessing games, songs, storytelling and classroom tasks provide repeated exposure to new words. Sinha (2023) suggests

that practical activities, role-play, songs, illustrations and real-life situations can make English learning more meaningful for young learners.

### 3. Games and Vocabulary Learning

Games such as bingo, matching, memory games, puzzles and guessing activities can make vocabulary learning interesting and interactive. Research indicates that game-based learning can support vocabulary development, motivation and learner engagement. However, games should have clear learning objectives and should be appropriate to learners' age and proficiency.

### 4. Storytelling and Vocabulary Development

Storytelling provides meaningful contexts for learning new vocabulary. Children can hear target words repeatedly and understand them through characters, actions and events. Activities such as picture sequencing, acting and retelling can further reinforce vocabulary and improve retention.

5. Realia and Pictures Realia, pictures and flashcards help young learners connect words with concrete objects and visual images. For example, real fruits can be used to teach apple, banana and orange. Such activities make vocabulary more understandable and reduce dependence on translation.

### 6. Role-Play and Contextual Vocabulary Use

Role-play gives learners opportunities to use new vocabulary in realistic situations. A classroom shop, for example, can help students practise words such as buy, sell, money and price. Thus, learners can move from simply recognising words to using them meaningfully.

### 7. Digital Activities

Digital games and language-learning applications can provide repetition, interaction and immediate feedback. Research has reported positive effects of digital game-based learning on vocabulary acquisition, although many activities focus mainly on recognising words. Therefore, digital activities should also be combined with speaking, writing and contextual vocabulary use.

### Objectives of the Study

The present study has the following objectives:

- To examine the role of Activity-Based Learning in vocabulary development among young ESL learners.
- To explore the effectiveness of games, storytelling, pictures, realia and role-play in vocabulary acquisition and retention.

- To identify the challenges and suggest practical strategies for effective activity-based vocabulary teaching among young ESL learners.

### III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 1. Research Design

The present study follows a qualitative literature-review and thematic-synthesis design. It does not present primary experimental data or claim to have conducted a classroom intervention. Instead, it synthesises existing literature concerning Activity-Based Learning, vocabulary acquisition, game-based learning and young learner English education.

#### 2. Sources of Data

The study draws upon peer-reviewed research articles, systematic reviews and scholarly literature concerning:

- vocabulary development among young English learners
- activity-based English teaching
- game-based vocabulary learning
- storytelling and vocabulary learning
- realia and visual materials
- young learner ESL/EFL pedagogy; and
- interactive language-learning approaches

Recent systematic reviews were given particular attention because they synthesise findings from multiple studies. For example, Liu and Reynolds' review examined 22 studies involving primary-school EFL vocabulary activities, while Firliantama and Rokhayani reviewed research concerning young learners' engagement in vocabulary learning through games and learning applications.

#### 3. Data Analysis

The literature was analysed thematically. Recurring findings were organised into the following themes:

- vocabulary acquisition;
- vocabulary retention and recall;
- contextual vocabulary use;
- learner engagement and motivation;
- activity types;
- teacher's role; and
- implementation challenges.

The findings below therefore represent a synthesis of the reviewed literature.

### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 1. ABL Supports Vocabulary Acquisition

The literature indicates that activity-based instruction can support vocabulary acquisition by exposing learners to words through multiple modes of learning. Children may see a word, hear it, pronounce it, act it out, connect it with an object and use it during interaction.

This multimodal exposure can make vocabulary more meaningful. For example, teaching the word jump through a teacher's explanation alone gives learners limited experience. Asking learners to physically jump when they hear the word connects the vocabulary item with an action.

The reviewed literature on young learners consistently identifies interactive activities as useful approaches to vocabulary development.

#### 2. ABL Can Improve Vocabulary Retention

Learning a new word once does not necessarily mean that the learner will remember it. Vocabulary requires repeated encounters and opportunities for retrieval.

Activity-based teaching can naturally create repetition without making repetition monotonous. A learner might encounter the word lion in a picture-matching activity, hear it in a story, identify it in a guessing game and later use it in a sentence.

The systematic review by Liu and Reynolds suggests that activities involving greater learner involvement can encourage deeper vocabulary learning processes and better retention.

Therefore, ABL can be particularly useful when teachers plan a sequence of activities around the same target vocabulary.

#### 3. Games Increase Engagement in Vocabulary Learning

Games can change the emotional atmosphere of vocabulary lessons. Children often participate more willingly when they have a clear goal, challenge or opportunity to interact with peers.

Research reviews have reported positive relationships between game-based learning, vocabulary outcomes, motivation and engagement among young learners.

However, the educational purpose of a game must remain clear. A game that produces excitement but requires little meaningful vocabulary processing may have limited instructional value.

For this reason, teachers should select games in which learners must recognise, recall, pronounce or use the target words.

#### 4. Storytelling Provides Context for Vocabulary

Storytelling makes vocabulary learning meaningful by presenting new words in context. For example, a farm story can introduce words like cow, farmer, field and goat. Children can practise these words through pictures, acting and retelling, which can improve understanding and retention..

#### 5. Realia and Visual Activities Make Vocabulary Concrete

Young learners can benefit from seeing and handling objects associated with new vocabulary. Realia and visual materials can reduce the cognitive distance between a word and its meaning. Picture cards, classroom objects, toys, drawings and photographs can therefore be integrated into vocabulary lessons. These materials are particularly useful in beginner-level classrooms where learners may have limited English proficiency.

Sinha's research on ABL for young ESL learners also highlights props, photographs, illustrations and real-life contexts as useful resources for making language understandable.

#### 6. ABL Promotes Active Vocabulary Use

Vocabulary learning should include the ability to use words in meaningful communication. Role-play, pair work and classroom simulations give learners opportunities to practise new words in real-life situations. Thus, ABL helps learners move from simply recognising vocabulary to using it effectively.

#### 7. ABL Supports Motivation and Participation

Activity-based games and interactive tasks can increase young learners' motivation, attention and classroom participation. However, enjoyable activities should also provide meaningful opportunities to learn, recall and use new vocabulary. Thus, activities should be both engaging and educational.

#### 8. Teacher's Role in Activity-Based Vocabulary Learning

ABL does not eliminate the teacher's role. Instead, the teacher becomes a planner, facilitator, language model and assessor.

Before an activity, the teacher needs to:

- identify the target vocabulary;
- decide the expected learning outcome;
- introduce or model the words;
- explain the activity clearly;
- organise learners appropriately; and
- monitor participation.

During the activity, the teacher can provide prompts and feedback. After the activity, the teacher should check whether learners can recognise, recall and use the target vocabulary. Thus, teacher planning is essential to the success of ABL.

#### 9. Challenges in Implementing ABL

Although the literature provides substantial support for activity-based vocabulary teaching, several challenges remain. First, large classes may make it difficult for teachers to monitor every learner's vocabulary use. Second, limited resources may restrict the use of technology or commercially produced materials. However, many activities can be developed using inexpensive materials such as paper, pictures, classroom objects and handmade flashcards.

Third, time constraints may make teachers reluctant to use activities that require preparation and organisation.

Fourth, classroom management can become challenging when games involve movement and competition.

Fifth, teacher preparedness is important. A poorly designed activity may provide entertainment without sufficient vocabulary learning.

Recent reviews of game-based vocabulary learning also identify limitations involving time, facilities and teachers' ability to implement activities effectively.

#### Suggestions

Based on the literature reviewed, the following suggestions are proposed for teachers and schools.

#### Set Specific Vocabulary Objectives

Every activity should have a clear vocabulary objective. Teachers should decide whether learners are expected to recognise, recall, pronounce, spell or use particular words.

#### Introduce Limited Numbers of Target Words

Young learners should not be overloaded with a large number of unfamiliar words in a single lesson. A smaller vocabulary set can be practised repeatedly through different activities.

#### Use Multiple Activity Types

Teachers should combine games, storytelling, pictures, realia, role-play and written practice. Different activities provide different kinds of vocabulary exposure.

#### Provide Repeated Exposure

Target words should appear repeatedly across lessons and activities. Repetition can be made interesting by changing the

context rather than simply asking learners to repeat the same word mechanically.

#### **Connect Words with Real-Life Contexts**

Vocabulary should be connected with children's experiences. Words related to family, food, school, animals, clothing, colours and daily routines can be taught through real objects and situations.

#### **Encourage Productive Use**

After introducing vocabulary, teachers should provide opportunities for learners to use the words in sentences, dialogues, role-plays and short descriptions.

#### **Use Low-Cost Materials**

Schools with limited resources can still implement ABL using flashcards, paper, drawings, newspapers, classroom objects, toys and locally available materials.

### **V. CONCLUSION**

The study shows that Activity-Based Learning (ABL) can support vocabulary development among young ESL learners through games, storytelling, pictures, realia, role-play and other interactive activities. These approaches provide meaningful repetition and opportunities to understand, remember and use new words. However, ABL is most effective when activities have clear objectives, appropriate difficulty, teacher guidance and assessment. Therefore, a balanced combination of explicit vocabulary teaching and purposeful activities can make vocabulary learning more engaging and effective. Further classroom-based research is needed to examine the long-term effects of different ABL techniques on vocabulary retention and use.

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