



The Analysis of Vocabulary Usage in The Online Game Application "Mobile Legend" at Junior High School

Mifta Farid¹, Muh. Tahir², Iskandar³, Muhammad Arham⁴, Agus Salim Jirong⁵

^{1,2,3,4,5} Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, Universitas Negeri Makassar

Corresponding E-Mail: fmifta801@gmail.com

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Abstract

This study explores the analysis of vocabulary usage in the online game application Mobile Legends at Junior High School. Using a qualitative design, the study involved 10 ninth-grade students as participants, selected for their active engagement with the game. Data were collected through observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. The findings reveal that students frequently acquired vocabulary related to gameplay, such as *cooldown (CD)*, *buff*, *nerf*, *ulti*, and *backdoor*. These terms were retained because they were repeatedly used and directly connected to in-game actions. Students reported that the interactive features of Mobile Legends, including quick chat, voice chat, and subtitles, facilitated vocabulary learning in an authentic context. The results indicate that Mobile Legends can serve as a supplementary medium for vocabulary acquisition among Generation Z learners. However, potential negative impacts, such as exposure to offensive language and excessive play, must also be considered. The study suggests that game-based learning should be integrated strategically into EFL classrooms to maximize benefits while minimizing risks.

Keywords: Analysis; Mobile Legend, Online Game; Vocabulary

Introduction

Vocabulary is widely recognized as a fundamental component of foreign language acquisition, as limited vocabulary can significantly hinder effective communication in a second language. Schmitt (2000) emphasizes that lexical knowledge is essential for achieving communicative competence, while Harmon, Wood, and Keser (2009) affirm its centrality in language learning. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), vocabulary mastery enables learners to express their ideas clearly and meaningfully (Alqahtani, 2015). Without adequate

vocabulary, grammar alone is insufficient for effective communication. In modern learning environments, various methods have been employed to enhance vocabulary acquisition, including the integration of games as an engaging learning medium (Setiyoko, 2015; Young & Wang, 2013). Games not only introduce new vocabulary but also create a relaxed and motivating learning atmosphere that reduces anxiety.

Several studies have explored the role of digital games in vocabulary acquisition. Reinders and Wattana (2011) found that online games can provide both positive and negative impacts, with benefits including increased interaction and exposure to authentic language use, while potential drawbacks involve overuse or distraction. Agustina (2016) highlighted the use of songs as an enjoyable learning medium, showing that entertainment-based approaches can boost student engagement. Recent works on Mobile Legends—a popular multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) game—have noted its capacity to enhance vocabulary through in-game terminology, team communication, and exposure to English-language content (E. Amanda, 2023; Dharmawati, 2024). However, they also indicate that many implementations have yet to integrate English subtitles systematically, limiting learners' exposure to authentic English text.

While prior studies demonstrate the potential of games for language learning, few have focused specifically on the systematic integration of English subtitles in Mobile Legends for junior high school students. Moreover, earlier research often involved small participant samples (Shabry, 2022) or lacked in-depth analysis of the specific vocabulary categories most effectively acquired through gameplay. The current study addresses these gaps by modifying the Mobile Legends subtitle setting to English and analyzing its influence on vocabulary mastery, particularly for Generation Z learners.

Generation Z, often referred to as digital natives, is highly engaged with technology and online games, making them a particularly relevant population for studying digital learning environments. Despite the growing interest in game-based learning, few studies have systematically examined how Mobile Legends, one of the most popular online games in Indonesia, contributes to vocabulary acquisition among junior high school students. Previous research has mostly focused on general language exposure or motivation but has not addressed which categories of vocabulary are most effectively learned and how English subtitle settings influence this process. In the Indonesian EFL context, where students often lack authentic exposure to English and rely heavily on traditional instruction, the integration of popular games into learning can provide meaningful and motivating input.

This study specifically investigates: (1) How does playing Mobile Legends affect vocabulary acquisition among ninth-grade students of Junior High School? (2) Which categories of vocabulary are most frequently learned through gameplay? and (3) What are students' perceptions of using Mobile Legends as a vocabulary

learning tool?

Method

Participants consisted of 10 ninth-grade students (5 males, 5 females, aged 14–15) from Junior High School. They were selected based on their regular engagement with Mobile Legends, with an average of two years of gaming experience. Data were collected using three instruments: (1) an observation checklist to record vocabulary use during gameplay, (2) semi-structured interviews to capture perceptions and learning experiences, and (3) documentation of gameplay and school activities.

Ethical approval was obtained from the school, and informed consent was secured from both students and their parents. Participants' identities were kept confidential. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, involving open coding, categorization, and theme development. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation of data sources, member checking, and peer debriefing. Data collection took place over three weeks (May 6–24, 2025) through both direct classroom observation and online monitoring.

The procedure involved obtaining school permission, observing gameplay, conducting and recording interviews, and compiling supporting documentation. Data were analyzed qualitatively by organizing and categorizing findings from observations and interviews, followed by drawing and verifying conclusions about the impact of Mobile Legends gameplay on vocabulary mastery.

Results

Vocabulary Acquisition through Mobile Legends

The study was conducted with ninth-grade students from Class B9 at Junior High School over a three-week period, from May 6 to May 24, 2025. Data were collected through direct classroom observations, online monitoring, and semi-structured interviews. The results revealed that the *Mobile Legends* game served as a significant informal learning medium through which students encountered new English vocabulary in an authentic context.

Students were frequently exposed to vocabulary items embedded in the game's features such as *quick chat*, *voice chat*, and in-game subtitles. These features provided immediate, context-based linguistic input, which facilitated natural vocabulary acquisition. Examples of frequently learned terms included "CD" (short for *cooldown*), "Backdoor" (a strategy to attack without the support of minions), "Funneling" (channeling resources toward a main hero), "Buff" (enhancing a hero's abilities), "Nerf" (reducing the strength of a character), and "Ulti" (ultimate skill). Students reported that these terms were often retained because they were repeatedly used during gameplay and associated with specific in-game actions.

Types of Vocabulary Learned

Students encountered both game-specific terminology (e.g., *buff*, *nerf*, *cooldown*, *ulti*) and general English vocabulary (e.g., *retreat*, *chase*, *advance*). Table 1 shows the frequency of selected vocabulary items, with *cooldown (CD)* mentioned an average of 15 times per game session, making it the most frequently encountered term.

Table 1. Most Learned Vocabulary from Mobile Legends

No	Vocabulary	Context in Game
1	CD	Cooldown period of a skill
2	Backdoor	Attacking the enemy base without minion support
3	Funneling	Prioritizing farming for the main hero
4	Buff	Temporary enhancement of abilities
5	Nerf	Reduction of power for game balance
6	Ulti	Hero's most powerful skill

Use of Game Features in Learning Vocabulary

The in-game *quick chat* feature allowed players to communicate key messages instantly without typing, reducing communication delays and increasing exposure to high-frequency English commands. Similarly, *voice chat* provided real-time oral interaction, enabling students to hear pronunciation, intonation, and conversational flow from peers or opponents, often in an informal register. Subtitles, which accompanied certain game modes or tutorials, acted as a bridge between visual cues and written language, supporting dual-channel learning as suggested by Mayer's multimedia learning theory.

Figure 1 illustrates students actively using the *quick chat* feature to coordinate strategies, demonstrating that these short text prompts serve as repeated vocabulary reinforcement in a high-stakes, goal-oriented environment.



Figure 1. Students Using Quick Chat in Mobile Legends

One participant noted: *"I hear the word 'retreat' many times in the quick chat. At first, I didn't know what it meant, but after using it in the game, I started using it in class when we discussed stories."*

Positive Implications

1. Improved English Vocabulary

The game provided repeated, contextualized exposure to both technical gaming jargon and everyday English phrases. Students were able to recall and apply these words in classroom activities, particularly in speaking and writing tasks.

2. Enhanced Communication Skills

Real-time interactions via voice and text chat improved students' ability to construct concise and effective messages. This skill transferred to academic contexts, as students became more confident in expressing ideas in English.

3. Increased Motivation to Learn

The enjoyment of gameplay served as an intrinsic motivator. Students who previously lacked interest in English showed higher participation in classroom vocabulary exercises when they related to *Mobile Legends*.

4. Development of 21st-Century Skills

Through collaborative gameplay, students practiced teamwork, strategic thinking, and problem-solving. These soft skills, combined with language acquisition, represent a holistic learning outcome.

Negative Implications

1. Exposure to Offensive Language and Aggressive Behavior

Students were often exposed to inappropriate language from other players, which risked influencing their verbal behavior outside the game.

2. Decline in Academic Performance

Excessive gameplay sometimes resulted in reduced time allocated to homework and study, leading to lower performance in other school subjects.

3. Health Concerns

Extended screen time was linked to eye strain, irregular sleep patterns, and decreased physical activity.

4. Reduced Face-to-Face Social Interaction

Students reported preferring online interaction over in-person conversations, potentially affecting their interpersonal skills.

Mobile Legends in the School Context

Observations in the school library indicated that students frequently used free internet facilities to play *Mobile Legends* during breaks or after school. The comfortable seating arrangements and lack of strict supervision created an environment conducive to gaming. While some students used this opportunity for cooperative learning and sharing vocabulary knowledge, others became distracted from academic tasks. This dual nature highlights the importance of structured

digital literacy programs in schools.



Figure 2. Students Playing Mobile Legends in the School Library

Government and Institutional Responses

The Indonesian government is in the process of drafting a Presidential Regulation aimed at protecting minors from the negative impacts of online games. This regulation may include measures such as time restrictions, age-based content classification, and the promotion of educational gaming. Several regional governments have already implemented policies prohibiting gaming during school hours, not only for students but also for government employees. Schools are encouraged to integrate game-based learning in a controlled manner, ensuring that educational benefits outweigh potential risks.

Discussion

These findings align with Nation's (2001) view that repeated exposure in meaningful contexts facilitates vocabulary acquisition. In line with Krashen's input hypothesis, the quick chat and subtitle features served as sources of comprehensible input that promoted incidental learning.

Impact of Playing Mobile Legends on Vocabulary Acquisition

This study revealed that the act of playing Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB) can produce both positive and negative effects on vocabulary acquisition among junior high school students at SMPN 5 Makassar. On the positive side, frequent gameplay provides immersive exposure to English lexical items embedded in hero names, skill descriptions, gameplay instructions, and in-game dialogue. This incidental learning aligns with Nation's (2001) assertion that repeated exposure to words in meaningful contexts facilitates vocabulary acquisition. For instance, one participant noted:

"When there are words, I don't understand—like item descriptions or skill combos—I use the in-game translation feature to find their meaning. Later, I try

to use the new words when talking with my friends."

Such experiences illustrate how in-game features like quick chat, hero voice lines, and subtitle systems act as scaffolds for vocabulary learning. Furthermore, interaction with international players, such as peers from the Philippines, provided authentic communicative contexts that encouraged negotiation of meaning, peer correction, and contextual application of newly learned terms.

However, the study also highlights potential limitations. Overreliance on game-based input without supplementary formal learning activities may result in an unbalanced lexical repertoire, where students acquire predominantly game-specific jargon but lack broader academic vocabulary. This echoes Schmitt's (2010) caution that domain-specific language learning must be complemented by diverse input sources.

Types of Vocabulary Learned in Mobile Legends

The lexical gains from MLBB gameplay largely fall into two categories:

1. **Game-Specific Terminology** – Words such as "buff," "debuff," "cooldown," and "minion," which are integral to gameplay mechanics.
2. **General English Vocabulary** – Common verbs and phrases such as "chase," "advance," "well played," and "retreat," often used in teamwork coordination.

Students reported that both reading on-screen texts and listening to voiceover audio were primary sources of learning. As one participant explained:

"I listen to the hero's voice and quick chat commands. If I hear a new word, I translate it. After I understand it, I try to use it in daily conversation."

Yet, the study also observed that frequent exposure to slang and informal expressions—common in player-to-player chats—can influence learners' language register. Without explicit guidance, this could result in inappropriate usage in formal settings, a concern consistent with findings by Sundqvist & Sylvén (2016) on gaming and informal language acquisition.

Students' Perceptions of Vocabulary Learning through Mobile Legends

Overall, students expressed positive attitudes toward using MLBB as a learning medium. They valued the game's interactive and engaging environment, which made vocabulary learning enjoyable and less monotonous compared to traditional methods. The immersive nature of gameplay supported both receptive skills (listening and reading) and productive skills (speaking and writing).

"I used to read my favorite hero stories because I was curious. If there was a new sentence I didn't understand, I used translation. Later, I tried using it when speaking to friends."

Nevertheless, some students acknowledged the risk of exposure to inappropriate

language and the possibility of gaming addiction. While the learning benefits were recognized, they also emphasized the need for self-regulation and balance between gaming and other academic responsibilities.

Implications of the Study

The findings suggest that MLBB can serve as a supplementary tool for vocabulary acquisition when integrated into a broader learning strategy. Teachers could potentially leverage game content for task-based learning activities, vocabulary lists, or role-play exercises based on in-game scenarios. However, the study also underscores the importance of monitoring for potential negative impacts, including:

1. **Aggression and Impulsiveness** – Resulting from competitive and fast-paced gameplay.
2. **Academic Performance Decline** – Due to excessive playtime reducing study hours.
3. **Social and Psychological Effects** – Such as isolation, verbal aggression, or exposure to inappropriate content.
4. **Physical Health Issues** – Including eye strain and sleep disturbances.

Addressing these concerns may involve setting gameplay limits, encouraging reflective language use, and promoting healthy digital habits. In this regard, the study aligns with Prensky's (2001) notion of "digital game-based learning" as a double-edged sword—capable of fostering engagement but requiring mindful moderation.

Limitation

A key limitation of this study lies in its small sample size (10 students from one school) and exclusive focus on Mobile Legends. Thus, the findings cannot be generalized to all Indonesian EFL learners. Future research could employ larger, more diverse samples and explore other gaming platforms to examine whether similar vocabulary learning patterns occur.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that Mobile Legends: Bang Bang (MLBB) can serve as a supplementary medium for learning English vocabulary, particularly among adolescents. Through in-game interactions, communication with other players, and comprehension of game narratives, students are exposed to new vocabulary, diverse language styles, and technical terminology specific to the gaming context. This exposure has the potential to enrich their vocabulary acquisition in an engaging and relatable way. However, such benefits should be approached with caution, as the immersive nature of MLBB also carries the risk of negative consequences, including game addiction and inappropriate language use.

Online game addiction manifests in various ways, such as persistent preoccupation with the game, anxiety or restlessness when unable to play, loss of interest in offline hobbies, dishonesty to gain more playing time, and the neglect of personal, social, academic, or professional responsibilities. Consistent with previous studies, symptoms may include excessive play to escape problems, emotional distress when prevented from playing, interpersonal conflicts, and a decline in participation in other meaningful activities. These patterns can be influenced by both external factors—such as the drive to achieve higher in-game rankings, insufficient self-regulation, and weak institutional control—and internal factors, including poor social relationships, lack of parental supervision, and the pervasive influence of globalization through technology.

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