



“Word of the Day”: Enhancing Student’s Vocabulary Through A Daily Strategy in EFL Classroom

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Abstract

This study examined the use of the “Word of the Day” (WotD) strategy as a means of improving vocabulary mastery among ninth-grade students at SMP Negeri 2 Samaturu. The intervention lasted seven weeks and involved 119 students from four classes, using a classroom-based field research design. Daily vocabulary activities were integrated into lessons through interactive methods such as group work, quizzes, and simple games, while data were collected through observation, questionnaires, and interviews. The findings showed that the WotD strategy helped students consistently expand their vocabulary and apply new words in meaningful contexts. It also increased participation and motivation, as interactive activities encouraged learners to engage more actively in classroom communication. Some differences in student engagement were noted, with challenges including varying levels of motivation, discipline issues, and occasional school activity disruptions. Despite these constraints, the study highlights the potential of WotD as a low-cost and sustainable approach to vocabulary instruction in rural EFL classrooms, contributing both to lexical growth and to fostering learner engagement.

Keywords: *Classroom engagement 1; English vocabulary 2; Secondary students 3; Vocabulary strategy 4; Word of the Day 5*

Introduction

Vocabulary is widely acknowledged as the cornerstone of second language acquisition, serving as the foundation for students’ ability to read, write, listen, and speak effectively. Without sufficient lexical knowledge, learners often struggle to comprehend texts, express themselves, or engage in meaningful communication (Nation, 2013). In the Indonesian EFL context, vocabulary instruction remains a persistent challenge, particularly at the junior high school level where students are expected to progress from basic to more complex communicative tasks. At SMP Negeri 2 Samaturu, a rural school in Southeast Sulawesi, Grade 9 students consistently demonstrated limited mastery of English vocabulary. Their classroom

experiences were largely dominated by traditional methods, such as rote memorization of word lists, which provided little reinforcement or contextualization. As a result, students frequently forgot newly learned words, reported low motivation, and displayed reduced confidence in using English. Limited exposure to the language outside the classroom and the lack of engaging instructional strategies further exacerbated the problem.

A number of studies have sought to address the issue of vocabulary learning through innovative pedagogical strategies. Research has shown that the use of multimedia resources, digital flashcards, and mobile-assisted language learning can significantly improve vocabulary retention (Aeni et al., 2024; Al Bariq et al., 2022). Other approaches, such as storytelling, songs, and games, have also been found to increase student motivation and foster long-term memory of new words (Putri & Ardi, 2020; Sari & Susanto, 2021). In the Indonesian context, previous studies on vocabulary teaching in rural schools have demonstrated the potential of contextualized learning activities to improve engagement and recall (Rahman, 2022). However, while these studies highlight the effectiveness of creative methods, they often rely on technology-based tools or short-term interventions that are difficult to sustain in under-resourced classrooms.

Despite the range of strategies explored, a gap remains in the implementation of practical, low-cost, and sustainable vocabulary approaches that are feasible in rural Indonesian schools. The "Word of the Day" (WotD) strategy, widely used in global contexts as a simple and consistent vocabulary exposure method (Graves, 2016), has received limited attention in Indonesian EFL research, particularly in non-urban settings. While it is not a novel strategy in itself, its application in rural, resource-constrained environments, especially in connection with behavioral outcomes like engagement and confidence, remains underexamined.

Theoretically, this study draws on principles of incidental and intentional vocabulary learning, as well as the spacing effect. Repeated daily exposure to vocabulary can aid retention through mechanisms such as retrieval practice, distributed learning, and contextual reinforcement. By integrating WotD into daily classroom routines, students encounter repeated and meaningful engagement with new words, which may enhance both cognitive processing and motivation.

In response to this research gap, the present study investigates the implementation of the Word of the Day strategy among 119 ninth-grade students across four classes (9A–9D) at SMP Negeri 2 Samaturu. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following research question: How does the Word of the Day strategy affect vocabulary mastery and classroom participation in rural junior high school EFL contexts? The objectives of the study are to (1) implement the WotD strategy as part of regular classroom instruction, (2) evaluate its effectiveness in enhancing students' vocabulary recall and usage, and (3) explore its influence on students' motivation and classroom engagement.

The novelty of this study lies not in the strategy itself, but in its contextual application: embedding WotD into the daily practices of a rural, low-resource classroom setting while examining both lexical and behavioral outcomes. By addressing a practical challenge in a specific underrepresented context, this study contributes to the broader discourse on equitable and sustainable vocabulary pedagogy in Indonesian secondary education.

Method

This study employed a classroom-based action research design in which teaching practice was integrated with systematic observation and data collection. The intervention was carried out over a period of seven weeks, from mid-July to early September 2025, during the implementation of the independent teaching program at SMP Negeri 2 Samaturu, Kolaka, Southeast Sulawesi. The focus of the study was the application of the Word of the Day (WotD) strategy as a structured approach to enhancing students' vocabulary mastery and engagement in English classrooms.

The participants of this study were 119 ninth-grade students, distributed across four classes: 9A (31 students), 9B (27 students), 9C (32 students), and 9D (29 students). The sampling used was intact class (convenience) sampling, as the classes were naturally assigned. Each class was taught by one member of the research team, all of whom were English education students conducting their teaching practicum under the same program. The school is located in a rural setting with limited exposure to English outside the classroom and minimal instructional resources, making it a suitable context for examining the implementation of low-cost, sustainable vocabulary strategies.

The WotD strategy was implemented in all classes, with intentional adaptations based on student needs and classroom dynamics rather than a uniform standard. In 9A, WotD was reinforced through homework assignments, in-class note-taking, and word-arranging games. In 9B, students learned approximately ten new words per week, applied them in written sentences, and reviewed them through weekly quizzes and group activities. In 9C, students practiced five new words weekly in short dialogues and conversations, with quizzes showing 50–70% recall rates. In 9D, WotD was incorporated into daily attendance routines, where students contributed one new word each, with reinforcement through guessing and matching games. Across all classes, the strategy was supported with interactive activities such as group work, quizzes, and games to promote active learning and engagement.

To capture both lexical development and classroom behavior, multiple instruments were used. Structured classroom observations were conducted using prepared field note formats and observation checklists to record student participation, motivation, and engagement. Two questionnaires were administered: the first focusing on students' interest in English, and the second exploring family and environmental support for learning. The questionnaires consisted of Likert-

scale and short-answer items. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected students from each class to gain deeper qualitative insights into their learning experiences and perceptions. Student performance was assessed through weekly vocabulary tasks, recall tests, and simple quizzes embedded within teaching sessions.

Data analysis followed a descriptive approach combining quantitative summaries and qualitative thematic interpretation. Student vocabulary growth was assessed through recall tests and classroom tasks, summarized as approximate percentages of successful word retention and application. Questionnaire responses were tabulated to identify patterns of interest, motivation, and family support. Observation notes and interview transcripts were coded thematically to capture trends in classroom behavior, participation, and gender-based differences.

Ethical considerations were addressed through permission from the school administration and informal assent from students. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by omitting all personal identifiers in the data reporting. Together, these procedures provided a comprehensive view of the effectiveness of the WotD strategy in improving vocabulary mastery and classroom engagement in a rural Indonesian junior high school context.

Results

The findings of this study are presented in five subsections: (1) vocabulary mastery, (2) gender-based outcomes, (3) classroom engagement, (4) student motivation and attitudes, and (5) challenges during implementation. Each subsection highlights outcomes from all four ninth-grade classes, supported by descriptive data, informal observation, and student feedback.

1. Vocabulary Mastery

The central outcome of this research was the improvement of students' vocabulary recall and application through the implementation of the Word of the Day (WotD) strategy. Each class was introduced to approximately five to ten new words per week, which were reinforced through short quizzes, simple written exercises, and interactive class activities such as games or short dialogues.

Because the study employed an informal classroom-based approach, the measurement of vocabulary mastery was conducted through simple teacher-made tools rather than standardized rubrics. "Successful recall" in this context referred not only to students' ability to memorize or repeat the target words, but also to use them meaningfully in sentences or everyday expressions. For example, students were often asked to come forward and use a newly learned word in a sentence or respond orally to short prompts.

The assessment procedures varied slightly across classes. In Classes 9A and 9C, the teacher observed recall during in-class games and follow-up homework tasks. In Class 9B, the focus was on written sentence-building, while in Class 9D, vocabulary was recalled during attendance routines followed by short oral quizzes.

The approximate outcomes across classes are presented below as estimated percentages based on observation and quiz results rather than precise statistical calculations.

Table 1. Vocabulary Recall by Class

Class	Student (N)	Avg. Recall (approx%)	Observed Range	Notes
9A	31	Around 60-65%	moderate	Stronger recall during in-class games; weaker on homework
9B	27	Around 65-70%	Moderate-high	Sentence-building tasks supported retention
9C	32	Around 65-68%	Moderate-high	Recall improved steadily with weekly review
9D	29	Around 60-65%	moderate	Routine WotD activities helped consistency, but effort varied

Overall, roughly two-thirds of students were able to recall and apply new words in context, demonstrating that repeated daily exposure and informal reinforcement supported vocabulary growth even without formal testing.

2. Gender-Based and Individual Factors

Observation and data analysis revealed differences in participation patterns among students, which appeared partly related to gender but also influenced by personal motivation and family support. Female students generally showed higher engagement and recall, completing most assigned homework and participating actively in group work. Male students, meanwhile, were more variable in their participation; some highly motivated, others disengaged or less consistent in completing tasks.

These patterns were observed informally by the teachers and supported by weekly checklists of task completion and class participation. It was also noted that motivation and home environment played an important role. Some male students with strong family encouragement performed comparably to their female peers, while others without such support tended to be less involved.

The table below provides an approximate summary of observed performance patterns, which reflect tendencies rather than statistically measured differences.

Table 2. Estimated Recall and Participation by Gender and Motivation (All Classes)

Group	Approx. Recall	Homework Completion	Engagement Level	Notes
Female (motivated)	Around 70–75%	High	Active	Consistent, often volunteered during activities
Female (less motivated)	Around 60–65%	Moderate	Responsive	Participated when prompted
Male (motivated)	Around 65–70%	Moderate–high	Passive	Performed better with games and peer support
Male (low motivation)	Around 50–55%	Low	Disengaged	Minimal participation; often distracted

Student comments from observations further illustrate these patterns.

- One *active* student shared: “*I always try to use the new word when I talk with friends, it helps me remember.*”
- A *responsive* student said: “*I can answer when the teacher asks, but sometimes I forget the meaning.*”
- A *passive* student noted: “*I listen, but I’m shy to say the words.*”
- A *disengaged* student admitted: “*I don’t like English, it’s hard for me.*”

These qualitative examples demonstrate that engagement and recall were not determined by gender alone but by a combination of motivation, confidence, and family encouragement.

3. Classroom Engagement

The success of WotD was also influenced by how students participated in class activities that supported vocabulary learning. Participation was tracked informally through daily observation checklists completed by each class instructor. Students’ engagement was categorized into four types: *active*, *responsive*, *passive*, and *disengaged*.

Overall, classroom participation in games and group work remained high, with roughly 70–75% of students regularly engaged. Games such as “word arrangement” and “guess the word” generated the most enthusiasm, while quiz participation was slightly lower because it required more individual effort.

A student from Class 9C remarked, “*I like when we play guessing games because I can remember the words better.*” Another from Class 9D reflected, “*Sometimes I just watch my friends, but I still learn when they answer.*” These comments show how the interactive nature of WotD encouraged both direct and

indirect engagement.

Table 3. Estimated Participation Levels in WotD Activities

Activity Type	Active & Responsive	Passive	Disengaged
Games	about 70–75%	15–20%	5–10%
Group Work	about 65–70%	20–25%	5–10%
Quizzes	about 60–65%	25–30%	5–10%

These data indicate that students benefited most when the WotD strategy was combined with collaborative, game-based activities that made vocabulary practice enjoyable and meaningful.

4. Motivation and Attitudes

The questionnaire and interview results provided deeper insights into students' motivation and attitudes toward learning English. Approximately 85% of students agreed that English was important for their future, although fewer than half considered it easy to learn. Students who received family encouragement, such as being reminded to study or having access to dictionaries, tended to participate more actively and recall more words.

For example, one motivated student shared, *"My parents always tell me to practice English, so I like learning new words."* In contrast, another student explained, *"No one helps me at home, so I only study at school."*

The questionnaire data were gathered informally through teacher-administered forms across four ninth-grade classes, representing a total of 119 students. The approximate results are shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Questionnaires Results: Motivation and Attitudes

Statement	Agree (approx. %)	Neutral (approx. %)	Disagree (approx. %)
"English is important for my future"	About 85	About 10	About 5
"I find English easy to learn"	About 40	About 30	About 30
"My family supports my English learning"	About 70	About 20	About 10
"I feel confident speaking English"	About 35	About 40	About 25

These findings indicate that motivation and family support play a key role in how students engage with the *Word of the Day* strategy. While most students recognized the importance of English, low confidence in speaking remained a major affective challenge, particularly for those lacking home support or consistent practice opportunities.

5. Challenges During Implementation

Although the program produced positive outcomes, several challenges were encountered. The most significant was the disruption caused by the Independence Day parade preparations, which interrupted lessons for one to two weeks. This reduced the continuity of WotD activities and made it harder for students to maintain routine recall.

Other difficulties included varying motivation levels, limited discipline, especially among younger male students, and a lack of resources for teaching materials or small prizes. Another recurring issue was the variation in student ability: some required multiple repetitions before remembering a word.

One teacher noted, *"Some students can repeat the words easily after two days, but others need to see them again and again."* This highlights the need for differentiated support.

Table 5. Challenges Encountered

Challenge	Observed Frequency	Impact Level	Illustration
Lesson disruption (parade week)	All classes	High	Activities paused for 1–2 weeks
Low motivation among some learners	Common	Medium	Some refused to join games
Limited respect for young instructors	Few cases	Medium	Noted in male-dominated groups
Resource limitations	Several	Medium	Lack of prizes or visual aids
Varied ability levels	All classes	Medium	Slower students required more repetition

Despite these constraints, the WotD strategy remained an adaptable and effective low-cost method for vocabulary learning in a rural EFL context.

Summary

Taken together, the results indicate that the WotD strategy was effective in enhancing students' vocabulary mastery, with approximately two-thirds of students consistently able to recall and apply weekly vocabulary. The strategy was further strengthened by interactive classroom activities, which increased engagement and reduced passivity. Female students benefited more from the program than male students, particularly in terms of recall, homework completion, and active participation. At the same time, students remained aware of the importance of English and motivated to learn, although confidence in speaking remained relatively low. Despite logistical challenges, the program succeeded in demonstrating the potential of WotD as a simple, adaptable, and sustainable vocabulary learning strategy for rural EFL classrooms.

Discussion

1. Vocabulary Mastery

The results of this study suggest that the Word of the Day (WotD) strategy was associated with improvements in vocabulary mastery among ninth-grade students in a rural Indonesian context. With an average recall rate of 65% across four classes, the strategy appeared to help students retain and apply new words in context. These findings are consistent with earlier research that emphasizes the importance of frequent, repeated exposure to vocabulary in second language learning (Nation, 2013; Graves, 2016). The structured and incremental nature of WotD allowed students to revisit words regularly, which may have reduced the rapid forgetting often seen in rote memorization.

From a cognitive perspective, repeated exposure supports long-term retention through mechanisms such as retrieval practice and spaced repetition, which strengthen memory traces when words are recalled across different contexts. When compared to typical forgetting curves (Ebbinghaus, as cited in Nation, 2013), the recall rate of approximately 65% after weekly practice suggests that sustained reinforcement activities, such as quizzes and sentence-building, helped improve retention.

Compared to previous Indonesian EFL studies focusing on games (Putri & Ardi, 2020) or multimedia tools (Aeni et al., 2024), this study indicates that a low-cost, non-technological method can also yield promising results. The stronger performance in Class 9C, where weekly quizzes reinforced learning, suggests that consistent formative assessment amplifies the benefits of WotD. However, variation across classes highlights the influence of classroom-specific dynamics, such as student motivation and teacher approaches, which may shape how effectively the strategy works.

2. Gender-Based Outcomes

One important observation in this study was the difference in performance between male and female students. On average, female students recalled 75% of vocabulary items and completed 80% of homework, while male students recalled 55% and completed 42%. These outcomes resemble earlier studies that report higher diligence and motivation among female learners in Indonesian classrooms (Rahman, 2022).

However, these results should be interpreted with caution. Gender differences may reflect broader sociocultural expectations, differences in classroom participation norms, or even measurement bias (for example, differences in willingness to complete homework) rather than inherent differences in ability. The findings should therefore be viewed as contextual observations, not definitive conclusions. Future research should further examine how classroom dynamics, peer influence, and teacher-student interactions contribute to such patterns.

3. Classroom Engagement

The use of games, quizzes, and group work alongside WotD appeared important in fostering active participation. Participation in games reached 74%, slightly higher than quizzes at 67%, suggesting that affective enjoyment supported learning outcomes. This aligns with previous research showing that interactive and cooperative learning activities enhance motivation and reduce passivity (Sari & Susanto, 2021).

Differences between classes also demonstrate the adaptability of WotD to different instructional routines. For instance, embedding WotD into attendance in Class 9D created a simple daily habit, while sentence-writing tasks in Class 9B extended vocabulary into productive skills. In contrast, Class 9A showed weaker outcomes when homework tasks were not reinforced consistently. These variations indicate that while WotD is adaptable, its effectiveness depends on thoughtful integration into classroom practices.

4. Motivation and Attitudes

Questionnaire data showed that 85% of students recognized English as important for their future, yet only 35% expressed confidence in speaking. This contrast reflects broader findings in EFL research, where strong awareness of the value of English often coexists with low confidence and speaking anxiety (Horwitz, 2010). While WotD supported vocabulary knowledge and classroom engagement, it did not fully overcome affective barriers such as speaking anxiety and fear of mistakes.

Nevertheless, WotD had motivational value. Daily exposure to new words, reinforced by interactive activities, made English lessons more engaging. Family support, reported by 70% of students, also contributed encouragement, though often limited to providing dictionaries or moral support. For future practice, WotD could be strengthened by integrating speaking tasks and confidence-building activities so that lexical growth translates more directly into communicative competence.

5. Challenges During Implementation

Several challenges limited the smooth implementation of WotD. The Independence Day parade disrupted classes for one to two weeks, reducing continuity. Instructors also reported limited respect from some male students, resource constraints for materials, and wide ability differences within classes. Such contextual realities are common in rural schools (Miles et al., 2014), highlighting that even simple strategies like WotD require flexible adaptation and institutional support.

Importantly, differences across classes suggest possible teacher effects and novelty effects, since each class was led by a different instructor and the strategy was new to students. These factors complicate interpretation and limit generalizability of the findings.

6. Implications and Novelty of the Study

This study contributes to the literature by showing how the Word of the Day strategy can be implemented in a rural Indonesian junior high school context. While WotD is not new globally, its application in under-resourced rural schools remains underexplored. By combining classroom practice with observations, questionnaires, and interviews, this study offers insights into both vocabulary outcomes and broader learner factors such as motivation, engagement, and gender.

The novelty lies less in the WotD technique itself than in its demonstration of adaptability in low-resource classrooms. In practice, “adaptable” means WotD can be embedded into different routines, such as attendance, sentence writing, group games, and scaled depending on resources and teacher creativity. Still, the results should be interpreted as exploratory rather than conclusive, given the absence of a control group, possible teacher/novelty effects, and the short seven-week timeframe.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that the Word of the Day strategy is an effective and sustainable approach to improving vocabulary mastery and classroom engagement among ninth-grade students in a rural Indonesian EFL context. Across four classes involving 119 students, approximately two-thirds of learners consistently recalled and applied new vocabulary in context. Female students generally outperformed male students in recall and participation, while interactive elements such as games, quizzes, and group work enhanced student motivation and reduced passivity.

Although students recognized the importance of English, many continued to experience low confidence in speaking, reflecting that vocabulary growth does not automatically overcome affective barriers. Several contextual challenges, including school activity disruptions, resource limitations, and varied ability levels, influenced the smoothness of implementation. These results must therefore be interpreted with caution, as they reflect outcomes within a single school and a relatively short implementation period.

Suggestions

Future studies are recommended to extend the implementation of the Word of the Day strategy over longer periods and across multiple schools to strengthen generalizability. Research could also integrate WotD with speaking and confidence-building activities, ensuring that vocabulary development translates into communicative competence. Given the observed gender differences, further exploration into motivational strategies for male learners would provide valuable insights. Finally, studies may investigate ways to institutionalize WotD into school routines or combine it with digital tools, where feasible, to enhance sustainability and reach. By addressing these directions, future research can build on the present findings and contribute more broadly to effective vocabulary pedagogy in

Indonesian EFL classrooms.

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