

Stimulating motivational engagement in vocabulary learning: evidence from the Top and Tail game in an EFL classroom

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Abstract: Vocabulary learning is an essential component of English language development, yet many students continue to face difficulties in achieving progress and maintaining motivation. This study aimed to examine the effect of the Top and Tail Game on students' vocabulary achievement and learning motivation. A mixed-method approach with a convergent parallel design was employed. Quantitative data were used to measure students' achievement, and qualitative interview and observation data were used to explore their motivation. The participants consisted of 20 second-grade junior high school students. The findings show a significant increase in post-test scores, indicating an improvement in vocabulary achievement. Qualitative results also reveal that indicators of motivated learning behavior appeared consistently during the game, supported by students' positive responses. These findings suggest that the Top and Tail Game can enhance engagement and support vocabulary learning. The study contributes empirical evidence to the growing body of research on game-based learning in EFL contexts.

Keywords: EFL learners, game-based learning, motivation, vocabulary achievement, top and tail game

Introduction. Vocabulary is essential for effective communication, yet English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners often struggle due to limited daily exposure to authentic language use in real-life situations. Furthermore, many students perceive vocabulary learning as repetitive and tedious, which often results in low levels of motivation and reduced classroom participation. This presents a significant barrier to successful language acquisition, as a high level of motivation is strongly correlated with superior learning outcomes and long-term retention of knowledge. Motivation plays a crucial role in directing what, when, and how students learn; it influences the amount of effort learners invest in educational activities, their willingness to participate actively, and their persistence when faced with difficulties. A motivated student is more likely to engage deeply with learning materials, practice new vocabulary consistently,

and develop stronger comprehension skills, whereas an unmotivated student may show minimal interest, avoid participation, and fail to engage meaningfully with instructional content. Consequently, fostering motivation in EFL classrooms is essential for improving vocabulary acquisition and enhancing overall language proficiency.

According to Self-Determination Theory, motivation is broadly categorized into intrinsic and extrinsic types. Intrinsic motivation refers to engaging in an activity for its inherent satisfaction, interest, and enjoyment rather than for external rewards or pressures. Gamified approaches such as the Top and Tail Game are particularly effective in addressing these motivational needs because they create an enjoyable and interactive learning environment that encourages active student participation. The game fosters a sense of autonomy by allowing students to select and produce their own words within the established rules and constraints. It also enhances feelings of competence as learners successfully recall vocabulary items and experience a sense of achievement during gameplay. In addition, the collaborative and competitive aspects of the activity strengthen relatedness by promoting interaction, cooperation, and social engagement among classmates.

Beyond these psychological benefits, the mechanics of the Top and Tail Game support several important cognitive processes involved in vocabulary acquisition and language learning. The game requires rapid lexical access, compelling students to actively retrieve words from their mental lexicon rather than relying on passive recognition. Such repeated retrieval practice strengthens memory retention and improves learners' ability to recall vocabulary more efficiently in future communicative situations. Furthermore, the enjoyable and low-pressure nature of the activity helps reduce anxiety and creates a more supportive classroom atmosphere. This process aligns closely with Affective Filter Hypothesis, which suggests that learners acquire language more effectively when emotional barriers such as fear, stress, or embarrassment are minimized. In a low-anxiety environment, students are more willing to participate, take risks, and experiment with language use, ultimately becoming more receptive to vocabulary learning and overall language development.

Method. This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-method design, in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed independently and subsequently integrated during the interpretation stage to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem. The quantitative component focused on measuring changes in students' vocabulary acquisition and motivation levels, while the qualitative component explored learners' experiences, perceptions, and attitudes toward the instructional intervention. By combining both forms of data, the study aimed to achieve methodological triangulation and enhance the validity and depth of the findings.

The sample consisted of 24 junior high school students aged 13-14 from in

Samarkand, Uzbekistan. The participants were selected because they represented adolescent EFL learners who were actively developing their English vocabulary skills within a classroom setting. This age group was considered particularly appropriate for the study, as young learners generally respond positively to interactive and game-based instructional techniques that increase engagement and motivation during language learning activities.

Three main instruments were used for data collection:

1. *Pre-test and Post-test*: A vocabulary test consisting of 20 items covering word recognition, meaning, and use in context. This was used to measure vocabulary achievement before and after the game intervention.

2. *Direct Observation*: Conducted over four meetings using a 12-item observation checklist adapted from established motivation frameworks to assess students' behavioral changes during different phases of the game.

3. *Structured Interview*: Administered during the final meeting with 8 specific questions designed to explore students' internal feelings, preferences, and perceptions of the Top and Tail Game.

Quantitative data were analyzed using paired-samples t-tests via SPSS, while qualitative data from observations and interviews underwent thematic analysis to identify underlying motivational patterns.

Findings and discussion. 1. Students' Vocabulary Achievement (Quantitative Data). The results of the pre-test and post-test scores were compared to determine the direct effect of the Top and Tail Game on vocabulary mastery.

-Pre-test Results: The baseline data from the initial assessment highlighted a notable deficiency in students' introductory vocabulary mastery. The pre-intervention mean score stood at 3.5, with 40% of the participants falling into the 'Satisfactory' (3) or 'Poor' (2) proficiency classifications. Only a marginal 5% (representing a single student) managed to achieve an 'Excellent' (5) grade, empirically reflecting the baseline challenges explored in the referenced study,

-Post-test Results: Following the targeted "Top and Tail Game" interventions, a substantial and statistically significant positive shift occurred in the final metrics. The post-test mean score rose sharply to 4.5. Specifically, thirteen students (65%) advanced to an 'Excellent' (5) grade, while seven students (35%) secured a 'Good' (4) classification. Notably, the lower proficiency bands (grades below 3) were completely eliminated (0%), demonstrating the robust efficacy of the gamified strategy

To test the statistical significance of the results, a paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare students' vocabulary performance before and after the implementation of the Top and Tail Game intervention. The analysis yielded a significance value of: $Sig. (2-tailed) = 0.000 < 0.05$. Since the obtained p-value was substantially lower than the conventional significance threshold of 0.05, the results

indicate that the difference between the pre-test and post-test scores was statistically significant. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected, while the alternative hypothesis was accepted. These findings provide strong empirical evidence that the Top and Tail Game had a positive and statistically significant effect on students' vocabulary achievement. Moreover, the improvement in scores suggests that incorporating game-based learning activities into EFL instruction can enhance learners' vocabulary acquisition, increase classroom engagement, and support more effective language learning outcomes.

2. *Students' Learning Motivation (Qualitative Data)*. The observation checklists tracked across four distinct meetings (ranging from writing on the board in teams to individual oral rounds) showed that the majority of the 12 motivational indicators were successfully met. The game successfully triggered an evolution from extrinsic motivation (the drive to win or avoid staying standing) into intrinsic enjoyment.

Interpretation of the qualitative findings yielded three distinct thematic dimensions reflecting student motivation:

✓ *Positive Affect and Collective Focus*: The learning environment was characterized by constant smiles, laughter, and immersion, highlighting how the group dynamics successfully fostered a deep sense of situational interest.

✓ *Reduction of the Affective Filter*: Learners gradually overcame the paralyzing apprehension of linguistic failure; their growing confidence was mirrored in their willingness to shout out words without worrying about minor spelling or articulation flaws.

✓ *Cognitive Stamina*: The gameplay demanded active and relentless determination, driving students to thoroughly explore their mental word banks to retrieve valid terms within tight time constraints.

During the structured interviews, students explicitly favored the Top and Tail Game over traditional vocabulary instruction:

Student 1: "The game was exciting and competitive, sparking a strong desire to win. This challenge effectively made me pay much closer attention to the spelling of new vocabulary."

Student 2: "It was an engaging and positive experience, providing a much less boring alternative to traditional vocabulary list reading."

Conclusion. The overarching findings of this research substantiate the value of the Top and Tail Game as a dual-action pedagogical intervention capable of driving both cognitive vocabulary gains and positive affective development among foreign language learners. A statistically significant upward trend in post-intervention scores validated its academic impact, complemented by qualitative indicators pointing to robust student engagement, enhanced self-belief, and sustained effort. Owing to its logistical simplicity, zero cost, and highly communicative design, the integration of

this verbal game into standard EFL curricula is strongly advocated as a means to lower the affective filter and cultivate active learning environments. Moving forward, expanding the research scope to feature broader demographic samples will be essential for mapping the long-term impact of such gamified strategies on sustainable vocabulary retention.

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