

Article

Stories of Learning Through Games: A Narrative Inquiry Into Vocabulary Learning Experiences of First-Year Junior High School EFL Learners in Himeji, Japan

Michelle R. Deocareza, LPT^{1*}, Joemar L. Furigay, PhD²

1. Student Researcher: University of Perpetual Help System DALTA
 2. Research Adviser: University of Perpetual Help System DALTA
- * Correspondence: mitchrico.1983@gmail.com¹, furigayjoemarlazaro@gmail.com²

Abstract: This study explored how first-year junior high school EFL learners in Himeji, Japan experienced and made meaning of vocabulary learning through game-based classroom activities. Although game-based learning has been shown to support motivation, participation, and vocabulary retention, much of the existing research remains quantitative and provides limited insight into learners lived, emotional, and relational experiences. This study addressed this gap by examining how learners narrated their participation in vocabulary games across time, relationships, and the cultural context of the Japanese classroom. Guided by Dewey's Theory of Experience and Clandinin and Connelly's Narrative Inquiry framework, the study investigated learners' stories through the dimensions of temporality, sociality, and place. Eight first-year learners were purposively selected as co-participants. Field texts were generated through narrative semi-structured interviews, written reflections, classroom conversations, researcher fieldnotes, and a dialogue-task reflection. These field texts were restoried and analyzed using the three-dimensional inquiry space, supported by thematic narrative analysis to identify recurring patterns, tensions, and turning points. The study provided an experience-based understanding of how learners' prior encounters with English, peer interactions, teacher support, and cultural expectations shaped their confidence, engagement, and emerging identities as English users. Findings offered context-grounded insights for designing culturally responsive and motivating game-based vocabulary instruction in Japanese EFL classrooms.

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1. Introduction

Globally, game-based vocabulary learning has become increasingly prominent in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education because of its potential to improve vocabulary retention, motivation, and classroom engagement [1]. However, much of the existing research has relied on quantitative methods, such as vocabulary tests, motivation scales, and short-term interventions, that emphasize measurable outcomes. Although these studies demonstrate whether game-based learning is effective, they offer limited insight into how learners personally experience these activities, interpret classroom interactions, or construct meaning from their participation. The few qualitative studies addressing these experiential dimensions have generally focused on university students or learners outside school settings. Consequently, the voices and lived experiences of younger learners, particularly junior high school students in East Asian EFL contexts, remain underrepresented in the literature.

Within Japan, vocabulary instruction has traditionally emphasized memorization, textbook-based exercises, accuracy, and preparation for assessments. Although educational reforms have encouraged more communicative and learner-centered approaches, many classroom practices continue to give greater importance to correctness than to meaningful language use. Learners' participation is also shaped by cultural and social expectations surrounding group harmony, modesty, discipline, emotional regulation, and the avoidance of mistakes. These expectations can influence students' willingness to communicate, take linguistic risks, or participate spontaneously in interactive activities [2], [3]. In Japanese junior high school classrooms, therefore, games may create opportunities for active and enjoyable vocabulary practice, but they may also produce discomfort or anxiety when activities are highly competitive or place students under social pressure.

Several important issues and trends emerge from this context. First, research continues to prioritize learning gains over learners' emotions, relationships, and personal interpretations, leaving the experiential side of game-based vocabulary learning insufficiently explored. Second, limited attention has been given to how sociocultural norms influence students' comfort, risk-taking, and interaction during classroom games. Third, learners' development over time is rarely documented, making it difficult to understand how their confidence, engagement, and vocabulary use change during an extended period of game-based instruction. These gaps point to the value of Narrative Inquiry, which foregrounds learners' voices and examines experience through temporality, sociality, and place [4]. Through interviews, reflections, classroom interactions, and field notes, this approach can reveal meaningful events, tensions, recurring patterns, and turning points that may remain hidden in test- or survey-based research [5], [6], [7].

Against this background, the present study seeks to explore how first-year junior high school EFL learners in Himeji, Japan, narrate and make meaning of their vocabulary learning experiences when game-based activities are integrated into classroom instruction. Guided by Clandinin and Connelly's Narrative Inquiry framework, the study examines how learners' experiences unfold over six weeks, how peer relationships, teacher support, emotions, and cultural expectations shape their participation, and how their confidence, engagement, and vocabulary use may change over time. Listening closely to learners' stories is important because these accounts can show not only what students learn, but also how learning through games feels and what it means to them as developing language learners. By identifying key events, turning points, and recurring narrative threads, the study aims to deepen qualitative understanding of vocabulary learning in East Asian EFL settings and provide practical insights for designing game-based activities that are engaging, culturally sensitive, supportive, and genuinely learner-centered.

1.1. Vocabulary Learning Experiences

Vocabulary learning is a central part of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education because it supports learners' ability to comprehend texts, communicate ideas, and participate meaningfully in classroom activities. Rather than developing vocabulary through memorization alone, learners strengthen their word knowledge through repeated encounters, purposeful use, and exposure to vocabulary in different contexts [8], [9]. Vocabulary development is also shaped by learners' language ability, motivation, learning strategies, and opportunities to encounter and use lexical items [10], [11]. Communicative practice and strategic vocabulary learning can improve learners' retention and productive use of words, while multimedia and multimodal materials may promote deeper processing [12], [13]. Incidental learning through reading, lectures, audiovisual materials, and interactive activities further shows that vocabulary develops gradually through meaningful and repeated exposure [14], [15], [16]. In Japan, this process is especially important because junior high school students must learn a considerable

number of word families across grade levels and may struggle to retain essential vocabulary without structured, engaging, and context-rich learning opportunities [17].

Game-based learning offers one way of providing these meaningful opportunities by bringing repetition, interaction, immediate feedback, and active language use into vocabulary lessons. Studies generally indicate that game-based environments can strengthen learners' motivation, participation, confidence, and vocabulary development by making classroom practice more interactive and supportive [18], [1]. Games can also promote autonomy and collaboration while reducing some of the anxiety associated with speaking and making mistakes in English [19], [20]. Technology-enhanced games extend these benefits through adaptive support, scaffolding, feedback, and personalized learning experiences [21], [22]. Moreover, narrative elements, immersive interaction, and creative tasks may deepen learners' emotional involvement and allow them to express their identities more freely [23], [24], [25]. Nevertheless, motivational and emotional gains do not always result in statistically significant improvements in performance, suggesting that games may affect learners' feelings and participation differently from their measurable vocabulary outcomes. Much of the research also focuses on digital platforms, leaving questions about how learners experience low-technology or teacher-designed games in ordinary classrooms.

Emotions and relationships are equally important because vocabulary learning is not simply a cognitive process. Enjoyment, curiosity, confidence, and a sense of achievement can encourage learners to participate, whereas anxiety, hesitation, and fear of negative evaluation may prevent them from using English openly [26], [27]. Although interactive and game-based tasks can create more comfortable conditions for communication, technology or playfulness alone may not remove emotional barriers, particularly among adolescents who are sensitive to peer judgment [28], [18]. Supportive peer relationships and collaborative classroom environments can help learners negotiate meaning and participate more confidently, but emotional responses still vary depending on the activity, social interaction, and classroom atmosphere [29], [30], [31], [32]. These emotions also change over time as learners accumulate experiences and interact with teachers and classmates [33], [34]. In Japanese EFL classrooms, willingness to communicate is closely connected to emotional support and the perceived level of classroom anxiety [3]. This makes it necessary to view learners' emotions as evolving, socially mediated experiences rather than as fixed psychological conditions.

The Japanese EFL setting adds an important cultural and institutional dimension to these experiences. English instruction has historically emphasized memorization, grammatical accuracy, textbook learning, and examination performance, despite more recent efforts to promote communicative and learner-centered teaching [3]. Learners' classroom behavior may also be influenced by cultural expectations involving modesty, group harmony, emotional restraint, and avoidance of mistakes, which can shape their willingness to communicate and take risks [3]. Interactive vocabulary strategies, pair work, and collaborative activities may provide more supportive opportunities for engagement than memorization-focused instruction [32], [35], [36]. Previous narrative studies likewise show that learners' classroom experiences are influenced by identity, personal history, emotional reactions, peer relationships, teacher support, and cultural expectations [26], [5], [37], [2], [38]. Studies of game-based and vocabulary-focused tasks further suggest that enjoyment, anxiety, failure, collaboration, and classroom relationships shape how learners understand and respond to learning activities [28], [39], [40], [41]. However, the predominance of short-term and outcome-oriented studies makes it difficult to understand how these experiences unfold naturally over time.

The study is primarily grounded in Dewey's Theory of Experience and Clandinin and Connelly's Narrative Inquiry framework. Dewey's theory explains learning through continuity and interaction: learners' past experiences influence their present responses and future possibilities, while learning emerges from their interaction with the

surrounding social and educational environment. Accordingly, students do not enter game-based lessons without prior experiences; their earlier successes, difficulties, and attitudes toward English may influence how they respond to games, interact with others, and develop confidence throughout the intervention [38], [37]. Building on this experiential foundation, Narrative Inquiry views experience as lived and storied across time, relationships, and settings. It allows the study to move beyond scores and observable behavior to examine how learners interpret moments of enjoyment, hesitation, challenge, participation, and personal growth [38]. The framework is operationalized through the three-dimensional inquiry space of temporality, sociality, and place, enabling the researcher to trace changes over time, examine emotions and relationships, and situate learners' stories within the Japanese junior high school classroom [38], [4], [42].



Figure 1. Theoretical Framework of the Study

The theoretical foundation is further supported by Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory, Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, and Engagement Theory. Social Constructivism explains that learning develops through interaction, dialogue, collaboration, and scaffolded support; thus, vocabulary games can become spaces where learners construct understanding with peers and teachers rather than merely receive information [27], [32]. The Affective Filter Hypothesis draws attention to how anxiety, confidence, and motivation can either limit or facilitate language acquisition. From this perspective, enjoyable and supportive games may lower learners' affective barriers and encourage more confident participation, although individual responses may still differ [26], [30], [3]. Engagement Theory complements these perspectives by emphasizing active participation in purposeful and collaborative tasks. Interaction, immediate feedback, cooperation, and meaningful involvement can help sustain engagement in game-based learning environments [20], [22], [1]. Together, these theories allow the study to understand game-based vocabulary learning as a cognitive, emotional, social, contextual, and storied process.

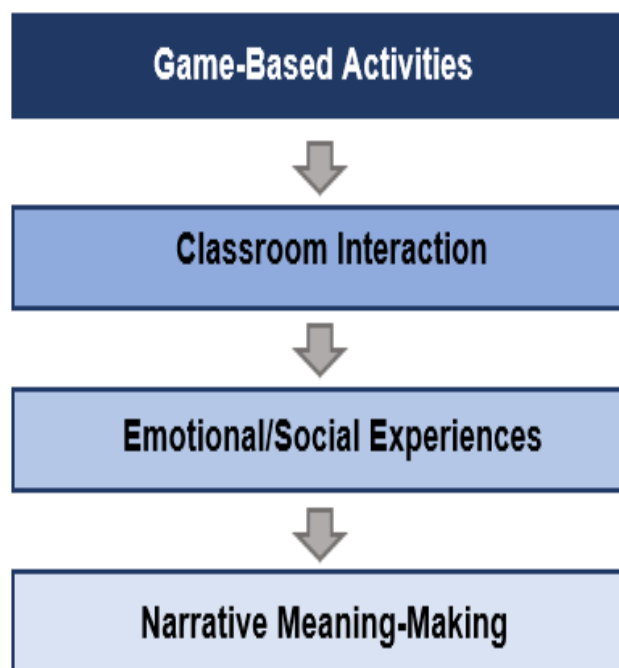


Figure 2. Conceptual Framework of the Study

The conceptual framework presents a connected process beginning with game-based vocabulary activities, followed by classroom interaction, emotional and social experiences, and narrative meaning-making. As learners participate in games, they engage in collaboration, competition, turn-taking, negotiation of meaning, and teacher–student exchanges. These interactions generate experiences of enjoyment, excitement, encouragement, belonging, hesitation, anxiety, and peer pressure, all of which may shape learners’ confidence, engagement, and willingness to communicate. Learners subsequently interpret these experiences through stories that connect what happened during the activities with their previous experiences, relationships, classroom setting, and developing identities as English learners. This process is examined through temporality, sociality, and place, with attention to how learners’ experiences change during the six-week instructional period [38], [4]. The framework therefore serves not only as a representation of the study’s concepts but also as a practical guide for gathering interactional, emotional, reflective, and narrative data from first-year junior high school learners in Himeji.

Despite growing interest in game-based vocabulary learning, a clear research gap remains. Most existing studies emphasize test scores, vocabulary gains, motivation ratings, and short-term performance rather than learners’ lived and storied experiences [43], [18], [39]. Narrative research has provided valuable accounts of identity, emotion, agency, and classroom relationships, but it has largely concentrated on teachers, university students, or adult learners rather than early adolescents [38], [5], [37]. In Japanese EFL research, cultural expectations such as modesty, group harmony, and avoidance of mistakes have been linked to participation and risk-taking, yet few studies have explored how young learners experience these expectations while participating in vocabulary games [44], [35]. The present study addresses this gap by using Narrative Inquiry to examine how first-year junior high school EFL learners in Himeji narrate game-based vocabulary learning over six weeks. Through the three-dimensional inquiry space and thematic narrative analysis, it seeks to identify key events, tensions, and turning points in learners’ confidence, engagement, participation, vocabulary use, and developing identities [38], [4], [42]. In doing so, the study offers a culturally grounded understanding

of what learning vocabulary through games actually means to young learners within the everyday realities of a Japanese EFL classroom.

1.2. Research Questions

This study seeks to address the lack of research on how first-year junior high school EFL learners in Japan experience and make meaning of vocabulary learning through game-based classroom activities across time, relationships, and place.

Central Narrative Inquiry Question

How do first-year junior high school EFL learners narrate and make meaning of their experiences learning English vocabulary through game-based activities over a six-week period?

Corollary Questions:

1. What key events, moments, and turning points do students identify in their stories of learning vocabulary through games during the six-week instructional period?
2. How do learners narrate the influence of peers, teacher support, classroom atmosphere, and Japanese EFL norms on their participation in game-based vocabulary learning?
3. How do learners describe changes in their confidence, engagement, and use of vocabulary as they participate in game-based activities over time?
4. What common and contrasting narrative threads emerge across learners' stories of learning vocabulary through games?
5. Based on these learners' narratives, what instructional insights may be proposed for designing responsive and culturally appropriate game-based vocabulary learning in Japanese junior high school EFL classrooms?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design

Narrative Inquiry was selected as the research design because it offers a human-centered way of understanding how first-year junior high school EFL learners experience and interpret vocabulary learning through games by attending to the stories they live and tell [5], [6]. Rather than focusing primarily on test scores or performance outcomes, this approach gives importance to learners' personal meanings, emotions, and interpretations [26]. Its attention to temporality, sociality, and place makes it especially appropriate for tracing how students' perceptions, feelings, and participation develop across the six-week implementation, recognizing that past experiences shape present understandings and future expectations [14], [11]. It also situates these experiences within the social and cultural realities of a Japanese junior high school classroom, where modesty, group harmony, and sensitivity to peer evaluation may influence learners' willingness to communicate and participate in interactive activities [3], [35]. Through interviews, written reflections, classroom conversations, and field notes gathered at different stages, the study can closely represent students' voices and capture the changing and layered nature of their experiences. These field texts can then be composed and restoried into narrative accounts that reveal patterns of development, tensions, and meaningful turning points in how learners make sense of game-based vocabulary learning over time [7], [6].

2.2. Philosophical and Methodological Foundation

The study is grounded in the Narrative Inquiry principles of interaction, continuity, and situation, which provide a meaningful framework for understanding learners' experiences as stories shaped by relationships, time, and context. Interaction reflects how learners' feelings, motivations, and personal interpretations intersect with classroom conditions, particularly as they respond to peers, negotiate turns during group games, and react to teacher guidance and feedback [26]. Continuity recognizes that learners interpret present experiences through their previous successes, challenges, and memories of learning English, which can influence their confidence, willingness to take risks, and expectations for future learning [38], [37]. Across the six-week implementation, this

principle makes it possible to trace how students' emotions, perceptions of vocabulary games, and sense of competence develop from one session to another. Situation further emphasizes that these experiences occur within a specific Japanese junior high school environment shaped by classroom routines, institutional expectations, and cultural values such as modesty, group harmony, and an emphasis on correctness [2]. The classroom's physical arrangement, the presence of peers and the teacher, and pressures related to assessment and behavior may therefore influence what learners perceive as possible, appropriate, or risky during game-based activities. Together, interaction, continuity, and situation offer a coherent philosophical and methodological foundation for exploring how students construct meaning from their vocabulary-learning experiences through games while foregrounding the temporality, sociality, and place reflected in their stories [26], [45], [37].

2.3. Selection of Storytellers

The storytellers in this study will be eight first-year junior high school learners enrolled during School Year 2026–2027 at a private junior high school in Himeji, Hyōgo Prefecture, Japan, who will participate in six weeks of vocabulary learning activities. Their experiences are especially valuable because they are at a developmental stage when confidence, peer relationships, and willingness to take risks are still emerging, all of which may shape how they engage with and make sense of game-based vocabulary learning. Participants will be selected through criterion-based purposive sampling, which is appropriate for Narrative Inquiry because it prioritizes individuals who can provide rich, experience-based stories rather than seeking statistical representativeness. To be included, students must be officially enrolled in the researcher's English class, participate consistently in the learning activities, be able to express their experiences in simple spoken or written English or Japanese, and be willing to take part in interviews, reflective conversations, and classroom-based narrative tasks. Parental or guardian consent and student assent will also be required, with participation remaining voluntary and coordinated with the homeroom teacher to ensure that the study's purpose, expectations, and ethical considerations are clearly understood. Students will be excluded if they are not members of the researcher's class, cannot participate consistently because of extended absences, scheduling conflicts, or health concerns, are unwilling or unable to share their experiences, or do not provide the required consent and assent. Selecting eight storytellers will allow sustained engagement with each learner and support an in-depth exploration of how their interpretations of vocabulary learning through games develop across time, relationships, and classroom contexts.

2.4. Data Generation

Data for this narrative inquiry will be generated from eight first-year Japanese junior high school students through multiple, interconnected field texts collected over a six-week instructional period and understood, following Clandinin and Connelly's narrative inquiry tradition, as relational and temporal constructions of learners' experiences with game-based vocabulary activities. Before data collection, the instruments will be validated for clarity, cultural suitability, and alignment with the research questions and theoretical foundations by one professor from the University of Perpetual Help System DALTA and two Department of Education English teachers with master's degrees in English Education, while the eight participants will review sample reflection prompts to ensure that they are age-appropriate, understandable, comfortable, and accessible to beginner EFL learners. The data will include two written semi-structured narrative interviews administered through Google Classroom in Weeks 1 and 6, each lasting approximately 20–30 minutes, to explore students' previous English-learning experiences, initial expectations, and later interpretations of learning vocabulary through games. Written reflective narratives will also be collected in Weeks 1, 3, and 5, with each activity lasting 10–15 minutes, to capture changes in learners' engagement, emotions, and interpretations over time, while a dialogue-task reflection in Week 4 will explore their experiences of using target vocabulary during peer interaction and their developing confidence. Classroom conversations and spontaneous expressions of enjoyment, hesitation,

frustration, and peer influence will be documented through observational jot notes expanded immediately after each lesson into detailed fieldnotes, while weekly researcher fieldnotes will record classroom events, interaction patterns, relational dynamics, and the researcher's evolving interpretations. These materials will be narratively coded using the Three-Dimensional Inquiry Space of temporality, sociality, and place, with all names and identifying information removed to protect participants' privacy. Students may respond in either Japanese or English, and Japanese responses will initially be translated using a digital translation tool such as Google Translate before being carefully compared with the original texts for meaning, context, emotional tone, and cultural nuance. A Japanese-English language teacher who is not involved as a participant will then review all translations, and any discrepancies will be resolved collaboratively with the researcher. Throughout this process, preserving each learner's voice, narrative flow, emotions, hesitations, and culturally shaped expressions will take priority over literal word-for-word translation, helping ensure that the final English texts faithfully and trustworthily represent the students' lived experiences.

2.5. Narrative Data Analysis and Restorying

Narrative data analysis in this study will be guided by Clandinin and Connelly's Three-Dimensional Inquiry Space, which provides a framework for interpreting learners' experiences through temporality, sociality, and place. Consistent with recent Narrative Inquiry studies, these dimensions will be explicitly examined to keep the analysis grounded in the storytellers' lived experiences [26], [45], [37]. Temporality will guide the examination of how each student's experiences develop across the six-week learning period, including the influence of past experiences on present actions and future possibilities, as reflected in important sequences, turning points, and developmental trajectories. Sociality will direct attention to learners' feelings, hopes, and dispositions, as well as their relationships with peers and teachers and the classroom norms influencing their engagement with game-based vocabulary learning. Place will situate their stories within the physical, cultural, and institutional environment of the Japanese junior high school classroom, including school expectations and sociocultural norms surrounding participation. The analysis will begin with repeated readings of all field texts to develop familiarity with each storyteller's experiences and identify recurring moments, tensions, and initial impressions. Interim narrative accounts will then be composed to capture emerging storylines and shape each learner's experience into a coherent narrative arc, after which brief member-checking conversations will allow students to clarify or correct the researcher's interpretations. Through restorying, events will be organized chronologically, key moments will be identified, and complete narrative accounts will be constructed to show how each learner makes sense of vocabulary learning through games within the classroom's relational and contextual conditions. Thematic narrative analysis and iterative comparison will subsequently be used to identify shared meanings, contrasting experiences, and cross-narrative threads across the individual accounts. Throughout these stages, temporality, sociality, and place will remain the central analytic anchors, ensuring that the final research text honors the learners' voices and faithfully represents how their experiences unfold over time, through relationships, and within their particular classroom environment.

3. Result

Table 1. Synthesis of Findings from the Corollary Questions

Corollary Question	Main Finding	Narrative Dimension	Contribution to the Central Question
RQ1: Key Events and Turning Points	Learners identified moments of shyness, enjoyment, challenge, peer support, and	Temporality	Shows how meaning was constructed through memorable

Corollary Question	Main Finding	Narrative Dimension	Contribution to the Central Question
	breakthrough vocabulary use.		events across the six-week period.
RQ2: Influence of Peers, Teacher, and Classroom Norms	Peer encouragement and teacher scaffolding shaped participation; cultural shyness influenced risk-taking.	Sociality / Place	Explains relational and cultural forces that shaped how learners interpreted game-based learning.
RQ3: Changes in Confidence, Engagement, Vocabulary Use	Learners became more confident, more engaged, and more able to use vocabulary meaningfully over time.	Temporality	Demonstrates developmental change and meaning-making across repeated game experiences.
RQ4: Common and Contrasting Narrative Threads	Shared patterns: reduced anxiety, increased engagement, stronger recall, social support. Contrasts: pace preference, confidence trajectories.	Temporality / Sociality / Place	Reveals collective and individual meaning-making across participants' stories.
RQ5: Instructional Insights from Narratives	Learners' experiences point to culturally responsive, low-pressure, socially supported game-based instruction.	Sociality / Place	Shows how students' meaning-making can inform responsive teaching practices.

Table 2. Integrated Narrative Meaning of Students' Game-Based Vocabulary Learning Experiences

Integrated Narrative Meaning	Supporting Corollary Findings	Supporting Participant Excerpts	Link to Temporality, Sociality, Place
1. Vocabulary learning becomes meaningful when connected to enjoyable, low-pressure game experiences.	RQ1, RQ2, RQ3	"Kahoot was fun because I could answer quickly." (P3)	Temporality: enjoyment grows over time; Sociality: shared fun; Place: safe classroom space.
2. Confidence develops through repeated exposure and supportive relationships.	RQ2, RQ3, RQ4	"My classmates help me when I read slowly." (P4)	Sociality: peer support; Temporality: confidence increases; Place:

Integrated Narrative Meaning	Supporting Corollary Findings	Supporting Participant Excerpts	Link to Temporality, Sociality, Place
			collaborative norms.
3. Engagement increases when games balance movement, competition, and quiet alternatives.	RQ1, RQ3, RQ4	"I felt nervous because I didn't know if my answers were correct." (P6)	Place: cultural shyness; Sociality: teacher reassurance; Temporality: gradual comfort.
4. Vocabulary recall strengthens through repetition and meaningful use.	RQ1, RQ3, RQ4	"I used describing words again and again." (P8)	Temporality: repeated practice; Place: structured classroom; Sociality: peer repetition.
5. Students construct emerging identities as English users through game-based participation.	RQ3, RQ4, RQ5	"I became more confident when I played the games." (P1)	Temporality: identity growth; Sociality: emotional support; Place: Japanese EFL norms.

The integrated narrative meanings across the learners' stories showed that their game-based vocabulary learning experiences were shaped by enjoyment, repeated practice, supportive relationships, balanced task design, and emerging identities as English users. Across the six-week period, learners generally described becoming more confident, engaged, and capable of using vocabulary; however, the researcher's fieldnotes revealed that this development was gradual, uneven, and dependent on the activity. Early observations included avoidance of eye contact, whispered responses, reliance on peer confirmation, and visible nervousness, particularly during public speaking tasks, while later sessions showed greater participation, clearer pronunciation, more natural vocabulary use, and increasing independence. Games such as Kahoot, Bingo, and Relay Race created enjoyable opportunities for practice, but learners' progress was also supported by peer scaffolding, teacher modeling, gestures, visual materials, encouragement, and positive feedback. Notably, quiet learners sometimes became highly engaged in fast-paced games, some hesitant game participants performed successfully in prepared dialogues, peers emerged as important sources of pronunciation support, and visual materials strengthened both comprehension and emotional engagement. At the same time, confidence remained context-dependent, as learners who participated actively during games sometimes became hesitant during formal dialogue performances because of audience awareness, perceived evaluation, and cultural expectations concerning modesty and correctness. The researcher's dual role as teacher and researcher also influenced the classroom atmosphere and the data, since enthusiastic facilitation and emotional support may have increased learners' enjoyment and willingness to participate, while the researcher's presence may also have heightened their awareness of being observed. Differences between learners' accounts and observed behaviors suggest that feeling confident does not always eliminate visible hesitation and that enjoyment does not necessarily indicate vocabulary mastery. Overall, the findings portray vocabulary learning not as a simple progression from shyness to confidence but as an evolving, relational, and context-sensitive experience shaped by learners' personal interpretations,

task demands, peer relationships, teacher support, and the cultural environment of the Japanese EFL classroom.

Table 3. Cross Participant Patterns of Key Events and Turning Points

Cross-Participant Pattern	Week or Period Observed	Description of the Key Event or Turning Point	Supporting Excerpt
Pattern 1: Early Shyness, Worry, or Stress in Week 1	Weeks 1-3	Most participants began the vocabulary game activities feeling shy, worried, stressed, or afraid of making mistakes when using English.	"I felt shy because I didn't want everyone to look at me." (P5) / "I felt stressed because I couldn't speak English well." (P7) / "I felt worried because I couldn't remember many English words." (P6)
Pattern 2: Difficulty with Speaking or Pronunciation	Weeks 1-3	Learners commonly experienced difficulty speaking English aloud, pronouncing vocabulary correctly, or answering confidently during game activities.	"It is difficult when I have to say the words." (P5) / "I couldn't speak loudly." (P6) / "My teacher helped me say the words correctly." (P8)
Pattern 3: Games Increased Engagement and Motivation	Weeks 1-3	Interactive vocabulary games became important turning points that increased students' enjoyment, motivation, and classroom participation.	"Kahoot was exciting because the music made the game exciting." (P5) / "I enjoyed Kahoot because I like choosing answers quickly." (P8) / "Bingo is fun." (P7)
Pattern 4: Peer Support Helped Learning	Weeks 1-3	Classmates supported one another by giving hints, repeating words, explaining meanings, and offering encouragement during games.	"My classmates helped me by giving me hints when I got stuck." (P8) / "We cheer for each other." (P7) / "My classmates helped me by repeating the words slowly." (P6)
Pattern 5: Support Facilitated Learning	Weeks 1-5	Teacher guidance through pronunciation correction, examples, questioning, and feedback helped	"My teacher helped me by correcting my pronunciation." (P8) / "Mitch checked if I understood the vocabulary." (P5) / "Teacher taught me

Cross-Participant Pattern	Week or Period Observed	Description of the Key Event or Turning Point	Supporting Excerpt
		students overcome learning difficulties.	how to say it correctly." (P6)
Pattern 6: Confidence and Participation	Weeks 3–4	Learners began participating more confidently, answering more quickly, and speaking English with greater ease than during the first weeks.	"I feel more comfortable now because I can read more English words." (P8) / "I spoke more smoothly today than before." (P5) / "I can answer faster now." (P7)
Pattern 7: Vocabulary Retention Through Repeated Use	Weeks 3–5	Repeated exposure to vocabulary through games and dialogue activities helped students remember and use new words more effectively.	"Using the words to express feelings helped me remember them." (P5) / "Hearing the words many times helped me remember them." (P7)
Pattern 8: Shift Toward English Learning	Week 6	By the end of the intervention, most learners described increased confidence, greater interest in English, and more positive attitudes toward vocabulary learning.	"I started to like English because I could understand more words." (P5) / "I feel more interested because I can understand more words now." (P8) / "I like English now because I like playing games." (P7)

The cross-participant analysis revealed that the eight learners' vocabulary learning experiences developed through recurring yet uneven patterns of shyness, pronunciation difficulty, fluctuating engagement, peer support, teacher guidance, and increasing confidence across the six-week game-based intervention. Many learners initially worried about making mistakes or speaking in front of classmates, as illustrated by P5, who shared, "I felt shy because I didn't want everyone to look at me," while P7 described feeling stressed because speaking English was difficult. Although repeated participation in Kahoot, Bingo, Relay Race, and dialogue activities helped many learners become more comfortable, anxiety persisted among some participants, particularly P2 and P7, during public speaking and individual-response tasks. Pronunciation also became an important turning point: learners such as P5, P6, and P8 gained confidence through repeated practice, peer assistance, and teacher modeling, whereas others continued to rely on structured activities and external support. Peer encouragement was especially meaningful for P3 and P8, but it did not always lead to independent speaking, as seen in P2's continued hesitation. Likewise, enjoyment did not consistently result in active verbal participation, because learners' engagement shifted according to task demands, social relationships, and perceived performance pressure. Over time, some learners, particularly P3, P5, and P7, began using vocabulary more independently, while P2 and P6 progressed more slowly and remained dependent on teacher cues and structured game formats. Viewed through Dewey's principles of continuity and interaction, these trajectories show

how earlier emotions influenced later participation and how relationships and classroom conditions shaped each learner's development. By the final weeks, many learners had begun to reconstruct their identities from uncertain beginners into more capable English users; however, continuing anxiety and inconsistent engagement among some participants demonstrated that confidence and vocabulary development were neither uniform nor linear. Overall, game-based vocabulary learning emerged as an evolving meaning-making process shaped by personal histories, repeated experiences, peer and teacher support, activity design, and the sociocultural expectations of the Japanese EFL classroom.

Table 4. Theme Clusters on Relational and Contextual Influences on Students' Participation in Game-Based Vocabulary Learning

Theme Cluster	Description of the Theme Cluster	Relational or Contextual Influence	Narrative Dimension
Theme Cluster 1: Peer Encouragement Fostered Active Participation	Learners described how encouragement, collaborative interactions, shared answers, and peer assistance during games reduced hesitation and promoted active participation in vocabulary learning.	Peer influence	Sociality
Theme Cluster 2: Teacher Guidance Built Vocabulary Confidence	Students highlighted how teacher modeling, pronunciation support, gestures, hints, corrective feedback, and clear instructions increased their confidence in understanding and using English vocabulary during game-based activities.	Teacher support	Sociality
Theme Cluster 3: A Supportive Classroom Environment Encouraged Participation	Learners described the classroom as comfortable, enjoyable, organized, and engaging, creating an environment where they felt more willing to participate actively in vocabulary games.	Classroom atmosphere	Place
Theme Cluster 4: Japanese EFL Classroom Norms Shaped Learners' Participation	Learners narrated experiences of shyness, fear of making mistakes, reluctance to speak loudly, and hesitation when uncertain about word meanings, reflecting the influence of Japanese EFL classroom expectations on participation.	Cultural and classroom norms	Place
Theme Cluster 5: Repeated Game Experiences Strengthened	Learners described becoming increasingly confident in remembering, pronouncing, and using English vocabulary as they participated in game-	Confidence development	Temporality, Sociality

Theme Cluster	Description of the Theme Cluster	Relational or Contextual Influence	Narrative Dimension
Vocabulary Confidence	based activities over the six-week learning period.		
Theme Cluster 6: Game-Based Learning Sustained Motivation and Enjoyment	Learners consistently described games such as Kahoot, Bingo, Relay, and Guess Who as enjoyable, exciting, and motivating, which encouraged sustained engagement with vocabulary learning.	Learning motivation	Sociality

The cross-narrative analysis revealed that learners' participation in game-based vocabulary learning was shaped by the combined influence of peer relationships, teacher scaffolding, classroom atmosphere, Japanese EFL norms, repeated exposure to games, and sustained motivation throughout the six-week intervention. Peer encouragement reduced the social risk of making mistakes by providing learners with reassurance, hints, shared answers, and pronunciation support, while teacher modeling, correction, gestures, examples, and clear instructions helped them move from uncertain word recognition toward more confident vocabulary use. A supportive and enjoyable classroom atmosphere further encouraged participation, although it did not entirely remove the anxiety associated with public speaking, accuracy, and individual performance. Cultural expectations related to modesty and avoiding public errors also continued to influence participation, as some learners became confident during group games but remained hesitant during dialogue presentations. Repeated experiences with Kahoot, Bingo, Relay Race, Guess Who, and dialogue tasks gradually strengthened vocabulary recognition, pronunciation, and use; however, the transfer from structured practice to spontaneous communication varied across participants. Learners such as P3, P5, and P8 demonstrated greater independence, whereas P2 and P6 remained more dependent on teacher cues, and P2 and P7 continued to experience fluctuating confidence during individual speaking tasks. Although games generally sustained enjoyment and motivation, engagement was expressed differently: some learners preferred quiet activities, others responded more strongly to competition and movement, and some, such as P7, experienced enjoyment without becoming verbally expressive. Viewed through Dewey's principles of interaction and continuity, these findings show that participation developed through the relationship between learners' prior experiences, emotional states, social interactions, and classroom conditions. Overall, game-based learning helped learners develop more positive relationships with vocabulary learning and emerging identities as increasingly willing and capable English users, but contrasting cases of slower progress, selective participation, persistent anxiety, and inconsistent engagement demonstrate that its outcomes were neither uniform nor linear.

Table 5. Narrative Patterns of Change in Confidence, Engagement, and Vocabulary Use

Narrative Pattern	Area Traced	Description of the Pattern	Field Texts Suggest	Supporting Field Text	Supporting Excerpt
Pattern 1: Growing Confidence	Confidence	Participants initially described shyness, nervousness, and fear of	Confidence increased through repeated exposure, peer support,	Week 1–6 reflections, interviews, dialogue task reflections	EN: "I feel better now because I am not as shy as before." (P1)

Narrative Pattern	Area Traced	Description of the Pattern	Field Texts Suggest	Supporting Field Text	Supporting Excerpt
		mistakes. Over time, they reported feeling “better,” “less shy,” “more confident,” and “comfortable” using English words.	teacher scaffolding, and game-based learning.		JP: 前よりは ずかしくな くなって、 気持ちがよ くなりました た。
Pattern 2: Increased Engagement	Engagement	Students shifted from passive participation (quiet, hesitant, listening only) to active engagement (joining games, enjoying activities, practicing with classmates).	Engagement was driven by fun, competition, movement, peer encouragement, and supportive classroom atmosphere.	Fieldnotes Weeks 1–6; reflections	EN: “I enjoyed the Relay Game because everyone was moving.” (P1) JP: リレ ーゲームで みんながう ごいてい て、きんち ょうがへっ てたのしか ったです。
Pattern 3: Improved Vocabulary Use	Vocabulary Use	Students moved from memorizing and forgetting words to recalling, pronouncing, and using vocabulary naturally in games and dialogues.	Repetition, contextual use, dialogue practice, and game-based recall strengthened vocabulary retention.	Interviews, reflections, dialogue task sheets	EN: “Using the new words in conversation helped me remember them better.” (P1) JP: 会話でつ かうと、こ とばをおぼ えやすくな りました。
Pattern 4: Social Support as a Learning Driver	Peer & Teacher Support	Students consistently described classmates and teacher as key sources of help, encouragement, and	Social interaction reduced anxiety and increased participation.	Fieldnotes + reflections	EN: “I joined more when my classmates cheered for me.” (P4) JP: クラスのみ んなが応援

Narrative Pattern	Area Traced	Description of the Pattern	Field Texts Suggest	Supporting Field Text	Supporting Excerpt
		confidence-building.			してくれ て、もっと さんかしま した。

The cross-narrative analysis revealed four interconnected patterns showing how learners' confidence, engagement, vocabulary use, and social support evolved throughout the six-week game-based intervention. First, learners generally moved from shyness, worry, and fear of making mistakes toward greater comfort and participation, as reflected in P1's statement, "I feel better now because I am not as shy as before," and P2's observation, "Yes, English became easier because the games helped me relax." However, confidence remained uneven and context-dependent, as learners such as P3 and P6 experienced renewed anxiety during dialogue performances despite participating actively in games. Second, enjoyment and interaction encouraged learners to become more engaged, with P1 explaining, "I enjoyed the Relay Game because everyone was moving," and P3 sharing, "Kahoot was fun because I could answer quickly." Nevertheless, some learners remained verbally quiet despite enjoying the activities, while others preferred less competitive games such as Bingo. Third, repeated and meaningful practice helped learners improve their vocabulary recall, pronunciation, and application, as demonstrated by P1's comment, "Using the new words in conversation helped me remember them better," and P3's statement, "I can use action words better now." Yet learners such as P2 and P6 performed more successfully in structured games than in spontaneous speaking situations, indicating that independent vocabulary use developed at different rates. Finally, peer and teacher support provided an essential foundation for participation and learning, with P4 stating, "I joined more when my classmates cheered for me," and P5 noting, "I joined more when the teacher helped me say the words." Although all eight learners regarded their classmates and teacher as important sources of encouragement, they differed in the type and amount of support they needed. Viewed through Dewey's principles of continuity, interaction, and meaning-making, these findings suggest that learners' development resulted from the accumulation of experiences over time and their relationships with people, activities, and classroom conditions rather than from games alone. Overall, game-based vocabulary learning supported positive growth, but contrasting experiences of persistent anxiety, slower improvement, and inconsistent engagement demonstrate that development was neither uniform nor linear.

4. Discussion

Integrated Interpretation: Continuity, Interaction, and Meaning Making

Across the four patterns, Dewey's principles of continuity, interaction, and meaning-making provide a coherent explanation of how learners' game-based vocabulary learning experiences developed throughout the intervention. Continuity was evident in how early experiences of shyness and fear influenced later participation, while accumulated positive experiences gradually supported greater confidence and vocabulary use. Interaction was reflected in the ways peer encouragement, teacher scaffolding, classroom atmosphere, activity structures, and cultural expectations shaped learners' emotional comfort and willingness to participate. Meaning-making emerged as learners interpreted games as enjoyable, motivating, and emotionally safe experiences, gradually reshaping how they viewed English learning and themselves as language users. These findings indicate that learners' development resulted not from games alone but from the interaction of repeated learning experiences with the social, emotional, and cultural conditions of the classroom.

Consequently, learners followed diverse trajectories characterized by increased or fluctuating confidence, selective participation, inconsistent engagement, and expanded vocabulary use. Through these interconnected relational and contextual experiences, they gradually developed more positive relationships with English vocabulary learning and constructed emerging identities as more willing and capable English users.

Methodological Reflections and Ethical Considerations

The methodological approach was guided by Narrative Inquiry, with restorying serving as the central process for presenting each learner's experiences as a coherent account while preserving the authenticity of the original field texts. The researcher repeatedly reviewed the narrative interviews, written reflections, dialogue-task reflection sheets, and fieldnotes to identify significant events, emotional shifts, and learning moments, which were then organized chronologically across the six-week intervention. Participants' original wording and intended meanings were maintained as much as possible, while member checking allowed learners to verify that the restoried accounts accurately reflected their experiences. Because all responses were written in Japanese, initial translations produced through Google Translate were subsequently reviewed by a Japanese-English language teacher for linguistic accuracy, cultural appropriateness, and fidelity to participants' intended meanings. The researcher's dual role as teacher-researcher was addressed through reflexive journaling and adherence to the study's standard operating procedures (SOPs), allowing continued reflection on how positionality might influence interpretation. Analytic consistency was further supported by two intercoders, with differences resolved through discussion and consensus. Ethical safeguards for the minor participants included using participant codes (P1–P8), removing identifying information, securing all research data, and obtaining parental informed consent and student assent. All planned procedures were implemented as outlined, including participant recruitment, the six-week game-based vocabulary learning intervention, field-text generation, member checking, intercoder review, restorying, and cross-narrative analysis, ensuring that the study remained methodologically systematic, ethically responsible, and grounded in the learners' voices.

Implications for Practice, Policy and Future Research

The findings have important implications for EFL teachers, curriculum planners, school leaders, instructional-material developers, policymakers, and future researchers by showing that game-based vocabulary learning is most effective when supported by emotionally safe, culturally responsive, and interactive classroom conditions. EFL teachers may use structured and enjoyable games that combine repeated exposure, movement, peer interaction, pronunciation modeling, and gradual transitions from guided activities to spontaneous communication, while remaining attentive to learners who continue to experience hesitation or anxiety. Curriculum planners may sequence varied games, collaborative tasks, communicative activities, and narrative-informed reflections to strengthen vocabulary retention, confidence, engagement, and learner voice. Although the findings emerged from a Japanese junior high school, they may also offer useful insights for comparable East and Southeast Asian EFL contexts where modesty, quiet participation, and fear of making mistakes influence classroom engagement; however, their application should remain sensitive to local cultures and institutional expectations. School leaders can support these practices by promoting professional development in game-based pedagogy, narrative-informed teaching, and low-anxiety instruction, while developers can design simple, predictable, and culturally appropriate materials that integrate repetition, movement, competition, peer collaboration, and graduated communicative practice. For Narrative Inquiry researchers, the study demonstrates the value of examining learners' experiences across temporality, sociality, and place, as well as using member checking, reflexive journaling, restorying, and careful translation when working with multilingual field texts. Researchers studying game-based learning may further investigate how different game types, peer dynamics, cultural expectations, and task demands influence emotional comfort and the transfer of vocabulary from games to spontaneous speaking. At the policy level, the findings support recognizing Game-Based Vocabulary Instruction (GBVI) within junior high school

English curriculum guidelines and incorporating its principles into pre-service and in-service teacher education. Because these implications are grounded in learners' narratives rather than experimental comparisons, they should be understood as context-specific insights into how participants experienced and interpreted vocabulary learning through games.

5. Conclusion

The learners' narratives indicate that game-based vocabulary learning became meaningful through repeated, low-pressure participation, supportive peer and teacher relationships, balanced task design, and opportunities to use English purposefully. Across the six-week period, the learners described movement from hesitation, pronunciation difficulty, and fear of mistakes toward greater confidence, engagement, and vocabulary use, although the pace and meaning of these changes varied according to individual emotions, prior experiences, and Japanese classroom norms. These findings suggest that culturally responsive game-based vocabulary instruction should combine structured games with progressively more communicative tasks, provide emotionally safe feedback and pronunciation support, offer both collaborative and quieter participation options, and include brief reflection activities that help learners recognize their progress. Teachers and school leaders are therefore encouraged to integrate such activities regularly, support professional learning communities and practical resource development, and ensure that curriculum guidance treats game-based vocabulary learning as a purposeful instructional approach rather than an occasional activity. Future research should extend the observation period, compare specific game formats, and incorporate both learner and teacher narratives to deepen understanding of how confidence, relationships, and vocabulary use develop over time.

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