

# Gamified Learning in EFL Classrooms: Students' Perceptions of Baamboozle Games for Vocabulary Mastery

Fatimah Azzahra<sup>1\*</sup>, Farida Repelita Waty Kembaren<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>English Education, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Indonesia

✉ Author Corresponding: [fatimah0304212144@uinsu.ac.id](mailto:fatimah0304212144@uinsu.ac.id)

## ABSTRACT

Incorporating games into education is an effective strategy to enhance student engagement. This study investigated how EFL students' emotional reactions and experiences influence their perceptions of the interactivity of Baamboozle games for vocabulary mastery. Conducted at two Integrated Islamic Private Junior High Schools in Medan, the research employed a case study design and a descriptive qualitative methodology, with 8 EFL students participating through observations and semi-structured interviews, which were conducted over a period of four weeks. The thematic analysis revealed that students' motivation, vocabulary acquisition, and engagement improved significantly, influenced by their emotional responses to the game. These findings highlight the potential of gamified learning platforms like Baamboozle games in enhancing language acquisition and emphasize the role of emotional engagement in mastering vocabulary, which the implication of provides insight for teachers to consider using game-based learning in teaching vocabulary.

**Keywords:** Baamboozle Games-Based Learning; Case Study in Islamic Junior High Schools (Medan); EFL Vocabulary Acquisition; Gamification in English Education; Students' Motivation and Engagement.



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Effective communication in a foreign language is ultimately dependent on vocabulary acquisition, as it provides the basis for speaking, listening, reading, and writing (Daulay, 2021; Patra et al., 2022; Li, 2025). For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Indonesia, vocabulary acquisition is crucial for engaging with a more globalized world, where they can use the language with confidence and fluency in real-life situations (Zhang et al., 2023). However, vocabulary acquisition remains a critical challenge in language education, with researchers and educators continuously seeking innovative strategies to enhance students' linguistic competence (Sahnan & Daulay, 2025). Specifically, becoming familiar with more difficult and complicated lexical items poses a significant challenge, as vocabulary related to feelings and emotions is essential for fluency, and idiomatic and subtle meanings create problems for learners (Hossain, 2024; Lasekan et al., 2025).

With technology and innovation growing within the education space, and through the framework of Society 5.0, learners' vocabulary acquisition habits are being transformed as they purposefully participate in collaborative, personalized, digital learning approaches, which increases motivation to learn and retention of learning engagement (Gan et al., 2023; Yu et al., 2023; Khodabandeh, 2025). As part of this, gamification provides a unique platform that incorporates gaming elements like songs, movement, and videos boosted motivation and comprehension into the learning experience, making it both interactive and enjoyable (Harahap & Kembaren, 2023). Research indicates that gamified learning tools, such as Baamboozle games, can enhance student motivation, engagement, and vocabulary retention when compared to other teaching strategies (Lan & Hong, 2025).

Despite the growing body of research on gamification in language learning, few studies specifically examine the perceptions of EFL students on Baamboozle games as a media for vocabulary mastery in terms of feelings and emotions. Much of the current literature demonstrated the potential benefits of gamification for vocabulary acquisition (Hongjin, 2022; Ebadi et al., 2024; Alnujaidi, 2025; Zhao & Yang, 2025), and expressed opportunities to enhance students' willingness to communicate (Tai, 2024), but there was limited empirical research in this field of study focusing on Baamboozle games. This current study aims to investigate how EFL students perceive and experience Baamboozle games as an interactive educational medium for vocabulary mastery.

This study addresses three critical gaps in the literature. First, it shifts the focus from competitive, recall-based media like Kahoot and Quizizz to Baamboozle games' team-based learning framework, which fosters discussion and collective problem-solving—a dimension underexplored in prior studies (Sevigny et al., 2024; Hong et al., 2025). Second, it targets affective vocabulary, such as feelings and emotions-related lexical items, a persistent challenge for EFL learners (Hossain, 2024), by analyzing how engagement with feelings and emotions, like being sad or excited, mediates vocabulary mastery and retention. Third, it examines these dynamics in Integrated Islamic Private Junior High Schools in Medan, Indonesia, where cultural and gender contexts may influence the efficacy of gamification. This study develops a model for gamified vocabulary learning that embraces a whole learning model by fusing Piaget's constructivism, Vygotsky's ZPD learning within reach, and affective learning approaches (Lasekan et al., 2025).

The study was framed by the theories of Piaget (1952) and Vygotsky (1978). Piaget's constructivist view suggests that learning is an outcome of active engagement through interaction, which can be understood from a gamified perspective, leading to cognitive development and increased vocabulary retention (Piaget, 1952). Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) highlights the importance of scaffolding and social engagement in learning and development, which is integral to Baamboozle games (Vygotsky, 1978). We are also beginning to see various studies examining gamification in education, which provide evidence that gamification can enhance student engagement and motivation, foster collaboration, and facilitate academic success in online learning (Oliveira et al., 2025; Feng et al., 2025; Slamet & Meng, 2025).

Baamboozle games offer a different interactive learning experience compared to other gamified learning media such as Quizizz and Kahoot. Suppose the focus of Quizizz and Kahoot is on assessments based on multiple-choice quizzes and timed assessments that reinforce recall. In that case, Baamboozle games focus on collaborative learning through team competition, allowing students to acquire vocabulary interactively and communicatively. Kahoot emphasizes the meaning behind the speed in arriving at their response (Wang et al., 2020), and Baamboozle invites discussion and a deeper understanding of vocabulary because students can collectively

strategize their responses. Furthermore, while Quizziz offers self-paced learning, Baamboozle games are also situated in a classroom setting, facilitating social interaction and cooperative learning with peers. These social aspects of learning enhance the interactivity of Baamboozle games for vocabulary acquisition, as students can pursue learning within the game context instead of engaging in world-building to activate passive recall-type learning (Sevigny et al., 2024; Hong et al., 2025).

Although previous research has discussed students' perceptions of applications that help learn English vocabulary, there are still views that focus on Baamboozle games and involve Private Integrated Islamic Junior High School students as participants. In that case, the limitation of this article is that the study's focus limits the participants. The researcher recommends further research to determine if there are differences when using Bamboozle games compared to other applications. This should be done by comparing two classes, rather than just examining the students' perspective through quantitative research. Therefore, this research aims to fill the void in interactive media for students to learn vocabulary in two Integrated Islamic junior high schools in Medan. This study investigates EFL students' perceptions of Baamboozle games as an interactive medium for vocabulary mastery, emphasizing interactivity, engagement, and learning impact. Using a qualitative case study design, this study offers insights into optimizing gamification in culturally specific EFL classrooms. The findings will provide educators with strategies to balance technology-enhanced and traditional teaching strategies for interactive vocabulary acquisition.

## 2. METHODS

This study employed a descriptive qualitative methodology with a case study research design, conducted at two Integrated Islamic Private Junior High Schools in Medan, Indonesia. This method was selected to gain an in-depth understanding of EFL students' perceptions of Baamboozle games as an interactive medium for vocabulary learning. The case study research design was considered appropriate as it allowed for a contextualized examination of students' experiences within a specific educational setting (Baxter & Jack, 2015). It was observed that Creswell (2015) noted that qualitative research effectively captures authentic participant perspectives, aligning with the exploration of student engagement in gamified language learning environments.

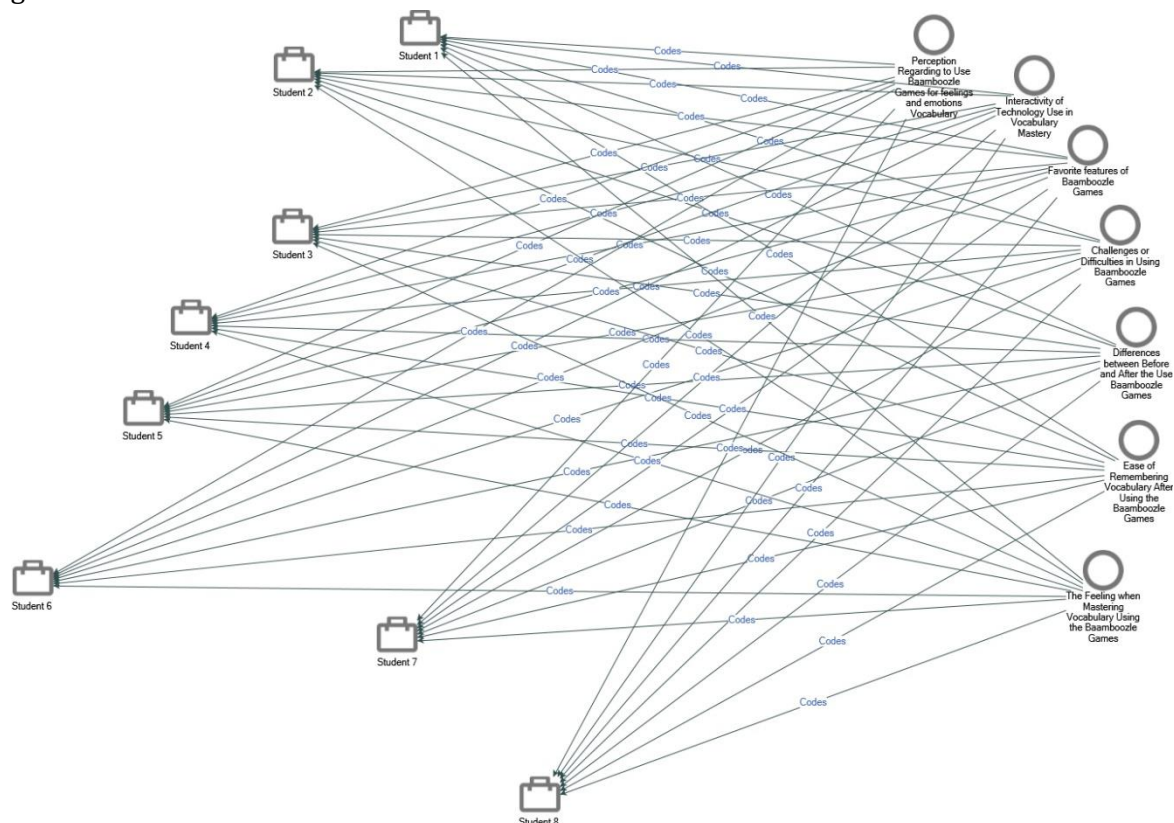
The participants in this study were identified from two all-female classes. We felt that by limiting the study to both, it would allow us to examine the specific learning experience of girls in a same-gender classroom. This is a regular part of the education of girls in Integrated Islamic Private Junior High Schools. We also aimed to minimize the effects of gender on interaction style, motivation, the use of tools such as gamified learning objects, and engagement with these objects. We have also noted that females in these schools often display other behavioral indicators of academic success, with evidence that includes engagement in teamwork and collaborative learning opportunities, all of which are healthy aspects of using gamified learning media like Baamboozle games. Purposive sampling was used to select the 8 EFL students for observation and semi-structured interviews. They were chosen because they were willing to participate and share their opinions in the research. They followed the instructions willingly, taking into account their academic performance and prior experience with gamification to ensure diverse perspectives were represented within the sample. The interview deepens and confirms that the observation results are in sync, and the students genuinely use and feel the difference after using Bamboozle games in their vocabulary mastery learning.

Data collection was primarily through two main instruments: observation and semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight EFL students, and an interview guide was developed consisting of seven open-ended questions. Each face-to-face interview lasted 25–30 minutes, was audio-recorded, and focused on topics including vocabulary retention and motivation to learn vocabulary (Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2025). The observation was also used to collect data on engagement and interaction in connection with the Baamboozle games during vocabulary learning sessions.

The data analysis followed three stages, as suggested by Ary et al. (2009): transcription and theme identification, thematic coding, and synthesis with direct student quotes to ensure authenticity. To maintain credibility, data triangulation was applied by comparing questionnaire results, interviews, and teacher evaluations (Denzin, 2018). Ethical considerations were strictly adhered to, with informed consent obtained from students and their guardians, and confidentiality ensured through the secure storage of audio and transcript data. NVivo 15 software was used for qualitative data analysis. The software facilitated a systematic coding process, ensuring a thorough examination of each student's views and a detailed, reflexive working relationship with the data.

### 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

After collecting and analyzing the data, the researchers noted several findings regarding EFL students' perceptions of using Baamboozle games as an interactive vocabulary mastery medium at Integrated Islamic Private Junior High Schools in Medan, Indonesia, which are categorized into seven main themes for the results of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Source triangulation using inter-code relationships

Data from the semi-structured interviews indicate that the majority of EFL students hold positive perceptions of using Baamboozle games as a medium for vocabulary mastery, particularly in understanding vocabulary related to feelings and emotions. The analysis of the semi-structured interviews results from 8 EFL students' perceptions is as shown in Figure 2.

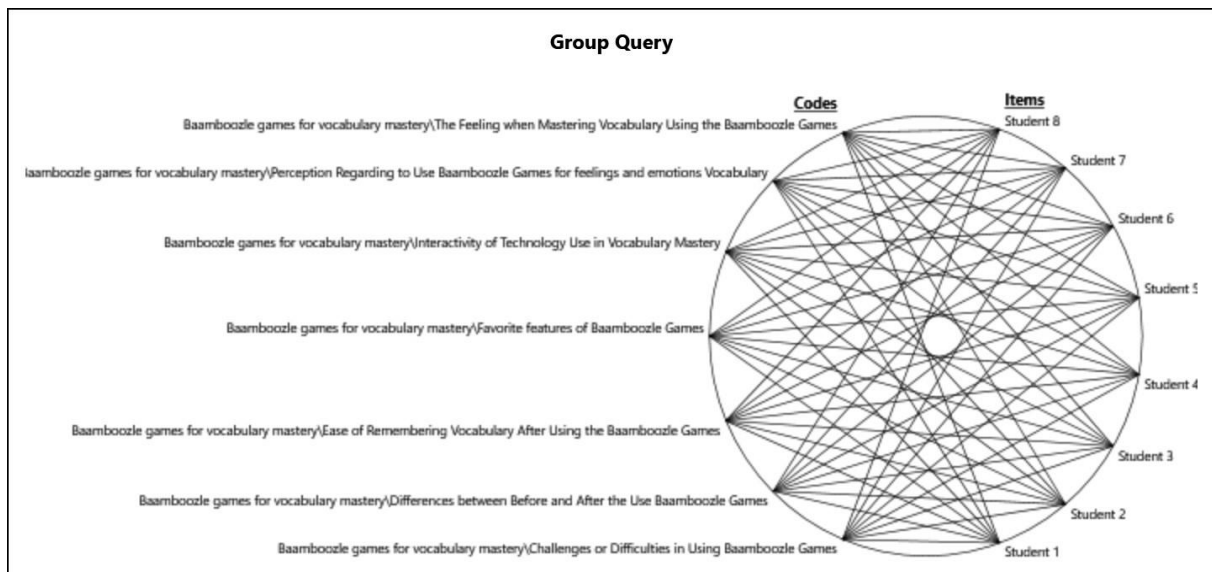


Figure 2. Group Query Interrelationships between Codes

One of the features of NVivo 15 software for displaying text visually is Word Frequency Query. This feature helps researchers display the frequency of interesting and informative words. Based on the search results using this feature, a collection of the most frequently occurring words in the data was obtained, as shown in Figure 3. The words "Baamboozle Games" and "Vocabulary" dominate the participants' conversations, accounting for 2.52% of the total data, followed by the words "using", "feelings", "emotions", and "easier".

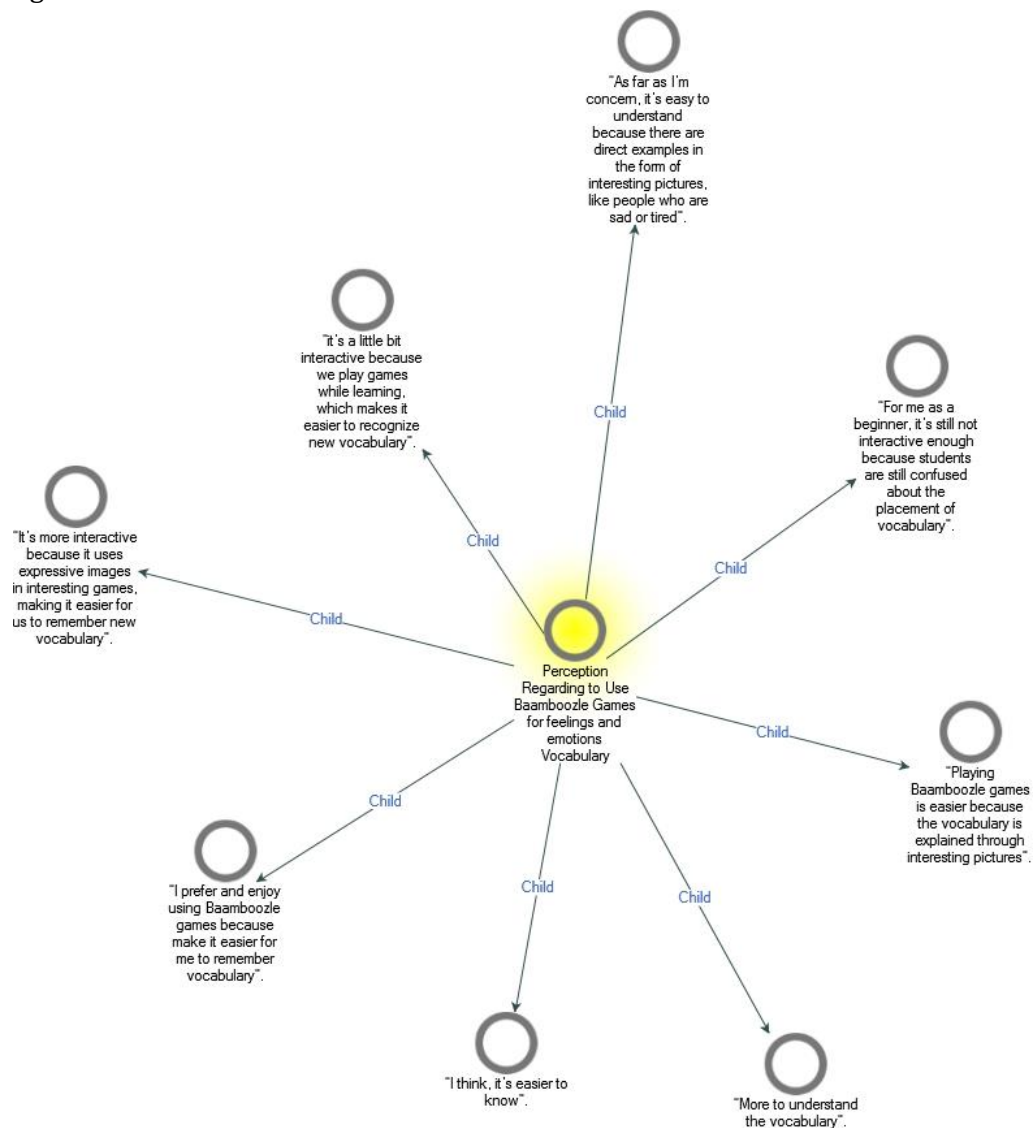


Figure 3. Most Frequently Used Words Cloud from the Data



### 3.1 Perceptions Regarding the Use of Baamboozle Games for Feelings and Emotions Vocabulary

Most EFL students provided insightful perspectives on how Baamboozle games helped them understand vocabulary related to feelings and emotions. They valued the contextual and visual aspects of Baamboozle games because they helped them conceptualize abstract concepts, as shown in Figure 4.



**Figure 4.** Exploratory Diagram of Perceptions Regarding the Use of Baamboozle Games for Feelings and Emotions Vocabulary

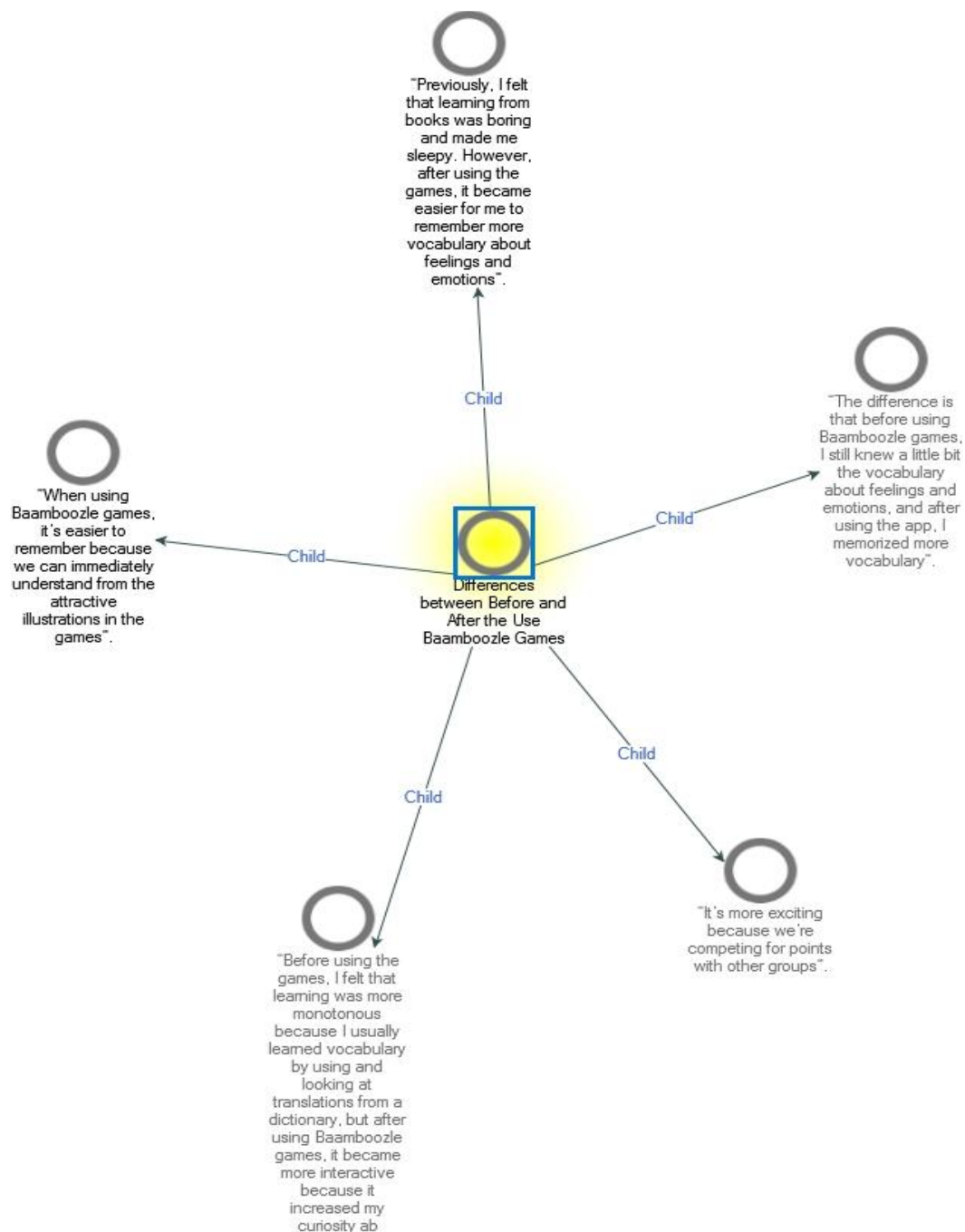
*"It is more interactive and easier to understand because there are direct examples in the form of interesting pictures, such as people who are sad or excited". (Student 2)*

*"I think it is interactive, because most of the students still did not understand the usual or traditional teaching strategies of using books and from the games, because of the vocabulary that often appears, it attracts students' attention to find the meaning of the vocabulary about feelings & emotions". (Student 5)*

This study found that the multimodal input within Baamboozle games, such as imagery and expressions, facilitated the conceptualization of vocabulary related to feelings and emotions. It was observed that Mayer's (2005) multimedia learning theory, which posits that visual stimuli enhance the retention of abstract lexical categories, was applicable in this context.

### 3.2 Differences between Before and After the Use of Baamboozle Games

EFL students compared their experiences before and after using Baamboozle games in the classrooms. Most students noted marked changes in both their vocabulary acquisition and learning attitudes after completing the Baamboozle games activities, as shown in Figure 5.



**Figure 5.** Exploratory Diagram of Differences between Before and After the Use of Baamboozle Games

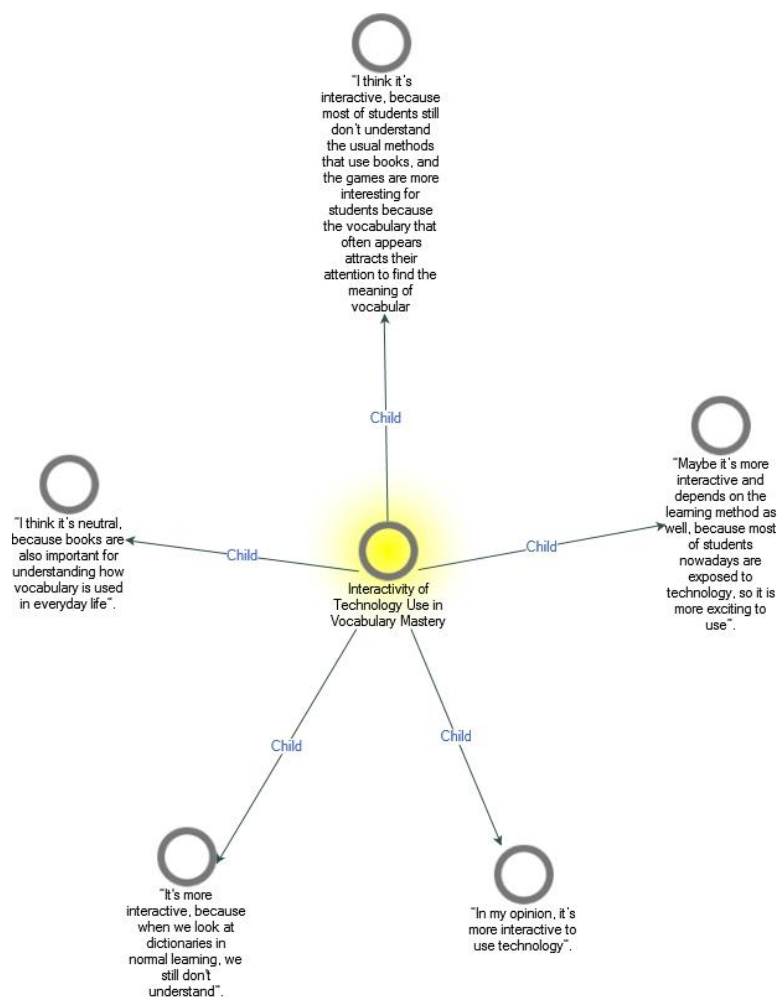
*"Previously, I did not know much vocabulary about feelings and emotions, but after using Baamboozle games, it became easier for me to remember vocabulary". (Student 1)*

*"Before using the games, I felt that learning was more monotonous because I usually learned vocabulary by using and looking at translations from a dictionary, but after using Baamboozle games, it became more interactive because it increased my curiosity about the vocabulary". (Student 6)*

The transition from passive to active engagement highlights the role of gamification in rekindling interest in vocabulary learning. EFL students' shift toward motivation and enjoyment reflects an increase in intrinsic motivation. It was observed that [Feng et al.'s \(2023\)](#) Online Learning Motivation Theory reinforces the idea that engagement is linked to autonomy and enjoyment in learning tasks.

### 3.3 Interactivity of Technology Use in Vocabulary Mastery

EFL students greatly benefit from the availability of technological features integrated into the Baamboozle games, which encourage interactive learning dynamics, stimulate collaboration, and meaningful engagement. However, there are still some EFL students who feel neutral because they believe that dictionaries and books are still important, as shown in Figure 6.



**Figure 6.** Exploratory Diagram of Interactivity of Technology Use in Vocabulary Mastery



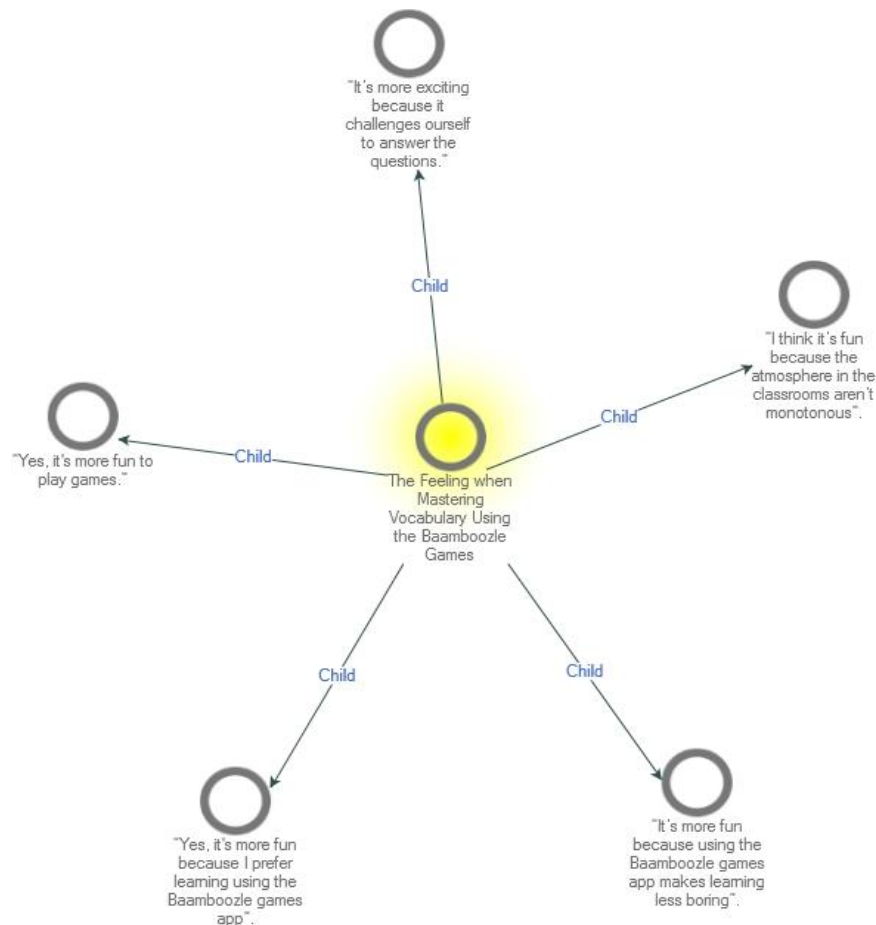
*"I think it is neutral, because books are also important for understanding how vocabulary is used in everyday life". (Student 3)*

*"It is more interactive, because when we look at dictionaries in normal learning, we still do not understand". (Student 8)*

This perspective highlights a generation whose use of digital media is commonplace, suggesting an integrated understanding of technology as an implicit way of learning, rather than as a separate entity. It was observed that [Ebadi et al. \(2024\)](#) and [Aljunaidi \(2025\)](#) conducted meta-analyses on Gamification theory. Lastly, this response highlights how digital literacy intersects with pedagogy, rendering Baamboozle games a pedagogically responsive medium. It was noted that sociocultural theory [Vygotsky \(1978\)](#) also applies here, where participants engaging in digital tasks in a 'shared' manner provide opportunities for mediated learning and the co-construction of knowledge.

### 3.4 The Feeling when Mastering Vocabulary Using the Baamboozle Games

All EFL students say that Baamboozle games are entertaining. The words "very fun" indicate an element of engagement among participants, along with the interactivity of the task, to create a learning opportunity where participants are engaged with the content on a deeper level. Thus, Baamboozle games triggered emotional engagement among learners, reinforcing their psychological investment in mastering vocabulary about feelings and emotions, as shown in Figure 7.



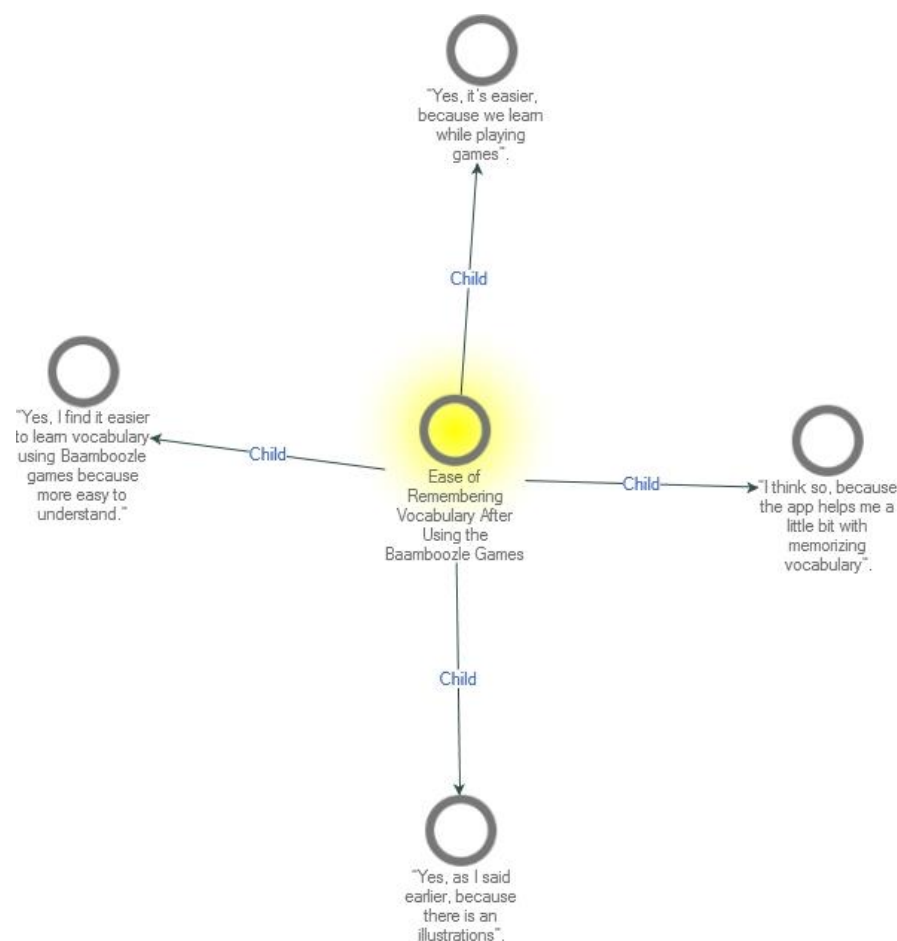
**Figure 7.** Exploratory Diagram of The Feeling when Mastering Vocabulary

*"I think it is fun because the atmosphere in the classrooms is not monotonous". (Student 5)*  
*"Yes, it is very fun because I prefer learning using the Baamboozle games app". (Student 7)*

This quote poignantly articulates the dual cognitive and affective benefits of gamified learning. From a neuroscientific lens, emotional engagement activates dopaminergic pathways, enhancing memory consolidation. Thus, positive affect catalyzes vocabulary mastery. It also echoes the tenets of the Affective Filter Hypothesis. It was observed that [Lasekan et al. \(2025\)](#) Emotional Intelligence and Vocabulary Learning theory, where lower anxiety and increased enjoyment directly facilitate vocabulary mastery.

### 3.5 Ease of Remembering Vocabulary After Using the Baamboozle Games

EFL students' positive affective and cognitive responses toward learning vocabulary through Baamboozle games indicate that the game-based learning environment not only supports vocabulary retention but also fosters emotional satisfaction and enjoyment. The metaphor "trains the brain and makes the heart happy" illustrates how intellectual stimulation and emotional well-being are interwoven, as shown in Figure 8.



**Figure 8.** Exploratory Diagram of Ease of Remembering Vocabulary After Using the Baamboozle Games

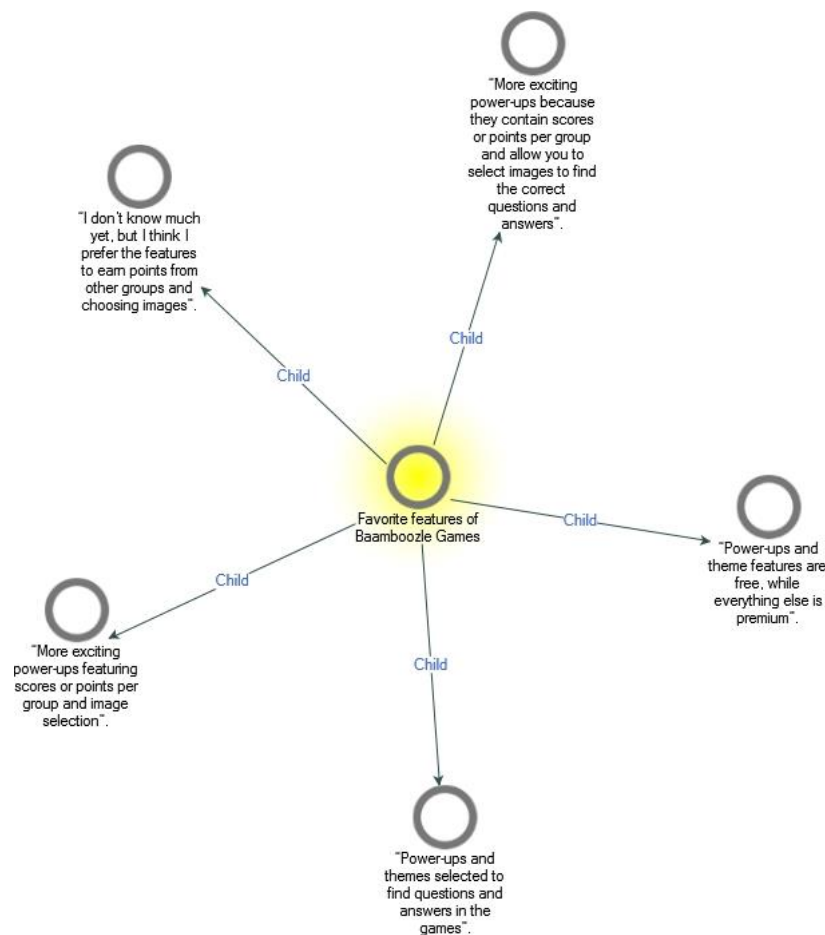
*"yeahh.. it is easier because it can train the brain and make the heart happy". (Student 2)*

*"yeahh...because it is easier remembering the vocabulary mastery". (Student 3)*

From a theoretical perspective, this study draws on Constructivist Theory [Piaget \(1952\)](#), which emphasizes that active engagement and enjoyable learning experiences facilitate more meaningful cognitive construction and improved retention. Furthermore, it was observed that [Lasekan et al. \(2025\)](#) view on emotional intelligence in vocabulary learning, where positive emotional states, such as happiness, can enhance the ability to comprehend and memorize affective vocabulary. Additionally, [Ebadi et al. \(2024\)](#) and [Aljunaidi \(2025\)](#) emphasize that gamification effectively enhances vocabulary retention by integrating educational content with enjoyment, thereby creating a more impactful learning experience. Thus, these quotes illustrate how the integration of affective enjoyment and cognitive stimulation through gamified media such as Baamboozle games creates a synergistic effect on both the emotional well-being and lexical mastery of EFL learners.

### 3.6 Favorite features of Baamboozle Games

This study selected EFL students who discussed specific game mechanics that enhanced their learning experience, such as animations, point systems, and power-ups, as shown in Figure 9.



**Figure 9.** Exploratory Diagram of Favorite Features of Baamboozle Games

*"I do not know much yet, but I think I prefer the features to earn points from other groups and choosing images". (Student 3)*

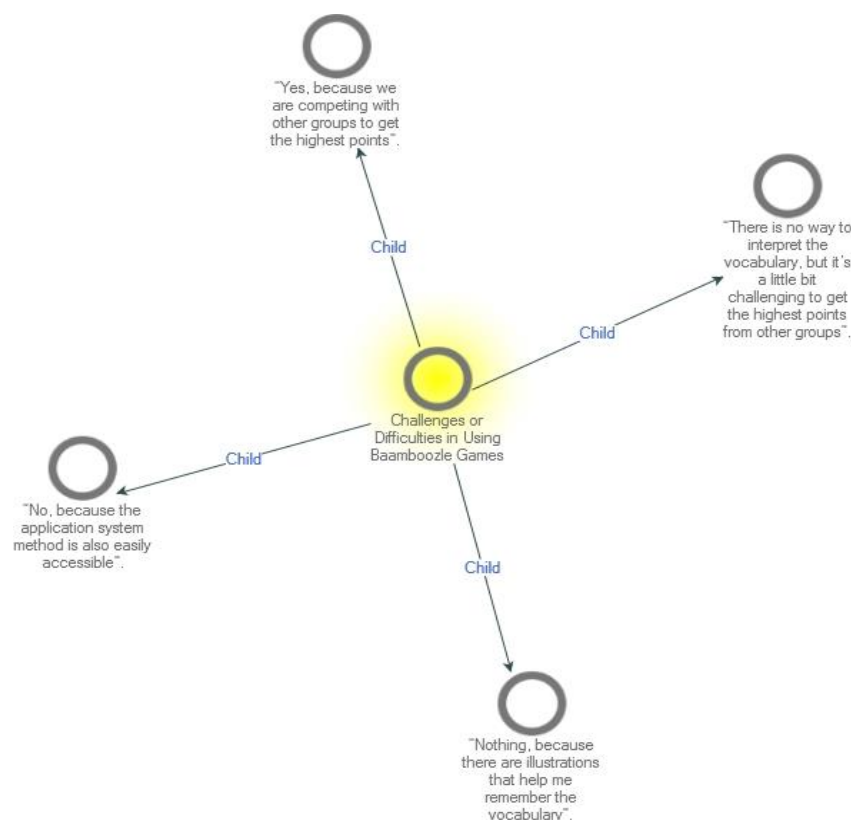
*"More exciting power-ups featuring scores or points per group and image selection". (Student 6)*

*"Features power-up and themes because only those are free, and everything else is premium". (Student 7)*

It was observed that [Oliveira et al. \(2023\)](#) theory of interactivity in digital learning, which posits that features such as power-ups and visual elements increase engagement and promote active learning. Additionally, [Mayer \(2005\)](#) Multimedia Learning Theory suggests that image selection enhances comprehension and memory retention, particularly when learners engage with visual content. Furthermore, the appeal of earning points in groups reflects [Vygotsky \(1978\)](#) emphasis on social interaction and scaffolding in learning processes, showing how collaborative competition boosts vocabulary mastery through peer involvement. Thus, the EFL students' responses underscore how gamified, collaborative, and visually supported tools can increase both motivation and cognitive engagement in EFL vocabulary mastery.

### 3.7 Challenges or Difficulties in Using Baamboozle Games

EFL students' interview excerpts reveal contrasting aspects of their experiences with Baamboozle games, indicating a struggle with interpreting vocabulary individually, yet also highlighting a competitive group dynamic. This suggests that while the game format may lack explicit vocabulary explanation, it fosters a challenging environment where peer performance motivates engagement, as shown in Figure 10.



**Picture 10.** Exploratory Diagram of Challenges or Difficulties in Using Baamboozle Games

*"There is no way to interpret the vocabulary, but it is a little bit challenging to get the highest points from other groups". (Student 3)*

*"Nothing, because it is very easy to access". (Student 4)*

These results supported Mayer's (2005) multimedia theory, emphasizing that visual elements, such as illustrations and animations, enhance comprehension and vocabulary recall, especially when students are learning about feelings and emotions. The credibility and dependability of the data analysis in this study were achieved through several purposeful methodology strategies. Triangulation was employed with the observations, semi-structured interviews, and teacher assessments to confirm the consistency of student responses. NVivo 15 software was used to provide structure to the coding process, thereby enabling the researchers to verify each other's coding through transparency and consistency, which allowed them to analyze each other's coding with logic and a basis for agreeing or disagreeing. Member-checking processes were also employed to verify participants' understanding of the codes produced, and the reflective journaling by the researchers, in line with the analytic dependability, was in keeping with the qualitative research rigor endorsed by Denzin (2018) and Stake (1995).

The results indicated that the use of Baamboozle games led to greater vocabulary retention, especially of emotional vocabulary (related to feelings and emotions) through the use of multimodal embedded representations. The visual and interactive features enhanced both cognitive and affective aspects, corresponding with Multimedia Learning Theory Mayer (2005) and Lasekan et al. (2025) work on the role of emotional intelligence in vocabulary acquisition. Combining visual stimuli, elements of competition and teamwork that Baamboozle enabled, enhanced the "game-like" feel of the intervention, which, through its enhanced saliency, held the potential to increase the degree of feeling and positive emotions that underpin retention and intrinsic motivation.

However, several participants still struggled to interpret the target vocabulary without direct explanation, revealing the limitations of the gamified approach for achieving deep semantic understanding. Although gamification encourages involvement and motivation, this approach does not necessarily result in a profound understanding of intricate lexical structures. This requires a pedagogical equilibrium between digital tools and traditional teaching, as suggested in previous research too (Alnujaidi, 2025). Learners construct deeper, more sophisticated meanings in vocabulary learning through pre-task talk and or post-game discussion.

Baamboozle games has had encouraging findings, and curriculum designers and educational policymakers are recommended to officially incorporate them into vocabulary learning units. This can be achieved by creating learning units that integrate powerfully motivating serious games into affective lexical themes. Furthermore, teachers of EFL would benefit from focusing on digital pedagogy and gamification skills to make the best use of such media, accommodating other principles related to low-inference learning and making classes more learner-centered and interactive, in line with what the national curriculum standards advocate.

This qualitative analysis offers practical implications for improving the design of learning in EFL classrooms. In particular, gamified approaches should not be considered as stand-alone approaches, but rather should be integrated with communicative and contextualized vocabulary development. The potential of Baamboozle games suggests that integrating them into collaborative group work and project-based learning can also make them more applicable for productive language skills, such as speaking and writing, rather than just solving vocabulary and



memory tasks. Additionally, the role of affect in the vocabulary learning process suggests that affective factors must be considered in instructional planning.

However, this study has some obvious limitations. The results should be interpreted within the context of using a small, gender-homogeneous sample from two Integrated Islamic Private Junior High Schools in Medan. Accordingly, the external validity is limited. Additionally, the qualitative nature of the data makes it challenging to apply statistics. Moreover, no comparison group is included, so this objective cannot be established with complete certainty; that is, we cannot definitively say that the vocabulary gains are only obtained due to the use of Baamboozle games. These constraints require cautious consideration of the data and careful extrapolation of the findings.

To overcome these constraints, implementing studies with larger samples and mixed-methods and quasi-experimental designs that compare Baamboozle with other platforms, such as Quizizz or Kahoot, among diverse learners and proficiency levels is recommended. Cross-cultural studies are also required to investigate the ways that students from varied educational and linguistic backgrounds interpret and react to gamified learning. Thus, both the benefits of gamified media for EFL teaching and learning can be more fully recognized and utilized.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study makes a theoretical contribution to the reinforcement of constructivist and sociocultural learning theories in the context of gamified digital environments. Examining the Baamboozle games to master affective vocabulary sheds new light on how emotional engagement and collaborative learning facilitate vocabulary mastery in EFL contexts. The results suggest that integrating multiple modes in gamification not only aids retention but also attempts to establish links between emotional engagement and lexical competence, thereby complementing current paradigms of language instruction. Such contributions build on the concept of interactive vocabulary instruction and lay the groundwork for future theory development in affectively gamified learning.

However, limitations in scope, particularly regarding population and qualitative design, necessitate a moderated interpretation of this study. While it finds some valuable implications for design-instruction, digital curriculum development, and teacher training, it does not extend acknowledgments of effectiveness to larger populations of learners. The practical side includes enhancing classroom practices by embedding Baamboozle games along with reflection and traditional media. To confirm and extend these findings, future research would benefit from engaging in cross-cultural longitudinal studies across different age groups, institutions, and genders. Certainly, with its promise of enhancing vocabulary acquisition in 21st-century EFL classrooms, the combination of gamified interaction and systematic pedagogy calls for greater attention.

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