


The COLAK Model for Vocabulary Learning in Primary English Classrooms

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*Rani Zahra, Yesi Darmayanti, Vivi Amanda, Arisman, Yondri Mei Muzaqi^{abcde}

¹²³⁴⁵Universitas Rokania, Indonesia.

Corresponding Author: ranizahra03@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Vocabulary development is fundamental to Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL), yet many primary English classrooms continue to rely on teacher-centred instruction with limited use of culturally relevant learning approaches. Although traditional games have been widely used as learning media, previous studies have largely treated them as supplementary classroom activities rather than structured instructional models with systematic learning procedures and multidimensional vocabulary assessment. Addressing this research gap, this study investigated how the COlourful CongkLAK (COLAK) model supports vocabulary development and student engagement in primary English classrooms. A descriptive qualitative approach supported by quantitative frequency analysis was employed with 18 second-grade students at SD Negeri 001 Rambah, Indonesia. Data were collected through structured classroom observations, observation checklists, and video recordings. The findings showed that the COLAK model effectively enhanced students' vocabulary development, particularly in word recognition, followed by pronunciation accuracy and meaning recall, while contextual word use remained the most challenging aspect. The model also promoted high levels of student engagement through meaningful interaction and collaborative learning. These findings suggest that the COLAK model provides an effective culturally responsive approach to vocabulary learning in TEYL.

Keywords: TEYL, Traditional Games, COLAK Model

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) has become a global educational priority as English proficiency is increasingly recognized as an essential competence for international communication, academic success, and future careers (Enever & Lindgren, 2021). Recent studies have further emphasized that early English instruction contributes not only to language proficiency but also to children's cognitive flexibility, intercultural awareness, and long-term academic achievement (Butler, 2024; Murphy & Evangelou, 2024). Consequently, many countries have introduced English at the primary level to maximize children's language learning potential during early cognitive and linguistic development (Garton & Copland, 2019). Vocabulary acquisition is fundamental to TEYL because lexical knowledge underpins learners' ability to comprehend and produce language effectively (Nation, 2022). Recent evidence also indicates that vocabulary development in young learners is most effective when instruction is contextualized, interactive, and supported by meaningful classroom experiences rather than isolated memorization activities (Alharbi, 2023). However, vocabulary learning remains challenging, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts where learners have limited exposure to authentic English outside the classroom (Alqahtani, 2019). In many primary schools, vocabulary instruction still relies on memorization and teacher-centred approaches, which often reduce learners' motivation and meaningful language use (Putri & Refnaldi, 2020).

Vocabulary acquisition among young learners differs substantially from that of adolescents and adults because children learn languages primarily through meaningful interaction, repetition, multisensory experiences, and contextualized exposure rather than through explicit grammatical instruction. According to Cameron (2001), young learners acquire vocabulary most effectively when new words are embedded in meaningful activities that connect language with concrete objects, actions, and familiar experiences. Similarly, Shin & Crandall (2021) argue that vocabulary learning in primary classrooms should incorporate play, movement, stories, songs, and games that provide repeated opportunities for authentic language use. Nation (2022) further emphasizes that repeated encounters with vocabulary in meaningful contexts are essential for developing both receptive and productive lexical knowledge. Therefore, instructional approaches that actively engage children in contextualized and enjoyable learning experiences are considered more effective than memorization-based practices for supporting long-term vocabulary acquisition.

Therefore, recent studies advocate learner-centred approaches that integrate play, collaboration, and meaningful communication to enhance vocabulary learning and retention (Shin & Crandall, 2021). Among these approaches, game-based learning has gained increasing attention for promoting active participation, motivation, and contextual vocabulary practice (Hapsari & Elyas, 2022). Recent systematic reviews have consistently reported that game-based language learning enhances vocabulary retention, learner motivation, classroom interaction, and long-term engagement among primary school learners, particularly when games are integrated with meaningful instructional objectives (Hsu et al., 2024). Likewise, culturally responsive pedagogy highlights the importance of integrating learners' cultural backgrounds and local traditions to enhance language learning, strengthen cultural identity, and increase classroom engagement (Gay, 2021). In multilingual contexts such as Indonesia, traditional games offer meaningful opportunities to support contextual vocabulary learning through familiar and interactive activities (Fajri & Marlina, 2023). Therefore, developing culturally responsive traditional game models has become increasingly important for fostering vocabulary development in primary English classrooms.

Previous studies have consistently shown that game-based learning enhances vocabulary acquisition among young English learners by increasing motivation, participation, and meaningful language use. Educational games provide enjoyable learning environments that promote repeated vocabulary exposure, reduce learners' anxiety, and encourage active classroom interaction (Hapsari & Elyas, 2022; Shin & Crandall, 2021). Studies conducted in Asian countries, including Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam, have further demonstrated that traditional games improve vocabulary retention through authentic social interaction and collaborative learning rather than rote memorization (Marlina et al., 2022; Nugroho & Mutiaraningrum, 2020). Similar findings have been reported in African and Latin American contexts, where culturally relevant games enhance learners' motivation, participation, cultural awareness, and language development (Gay, 2021; Hammond, 2023). Likewise, culturally responsive pedagogy emphasizes that linking instruction to learners' cultural experiences facilitates meaningful vocabulary learning through familiar contexts (Gay, 2021). More recent research has also highlighted that culturally responsive instructional practices strengthen learners' sense of identity while improving language achievement and classroom participation, particularly in multilingual educational contexts (Gay, 2021; Hammond, 2023). In Indonesia, traditional games such as congklak, gobak sodor, engklek, and ular tangga have been widely used to improve vocabulary mastery, communication, and collaborative learning (Fajri & Marlina, 2023; Putri & Refnaldi, 2020). However, these games have generally been used as instructional media or supplementary classroom activities rather than as structured instructional models with systematic learning procedures and comprehensive vocabulary assessment. Therefore, existing studies highlight the need to develop culturally responsive instructional models that integrate traditional games into systematic vocabulary learning for young English learners.

Despite extensive research on game-based learning and culturally responsive pedagogy, several important gaps remain in the TEYL literature. First, previous studies have

focused largely on digital games and gamified applications, while the potential of traditional games as structured instructional models for vocabulary learning has received limited attention (Hapsari & Elyas, 2022; Shin & Crandall, 2021). Second, traditional games have generally been used as instructional media rather than as comprehensive learning models with systematic instructional procedures and assessment (Fajri & Marlina, 2023; Nugroho & Mutiaraningrum, 2020). Third, vocabulary learning has mostly been evaluated through overall achievement scores, providing limited evidence of learners' development in word recognition, pronunciation accuracy, meaning recall, and contextual word use throughout the learning process (Nation, 2022). Likewise, learner engagement has received relatively little attention despite its important role in vocabulary acquisition (Fredricks et al., 2023). Moreover, empirical evidence on how culturally responsive traditional games simultaneously promote language learning, classroom engagement, and cultural appreciation remains scarce, particularly in Indonesian primary schools. More importantly, no published study has developed and empirically evaluated the COlourful CongkLAK (COLAK) model as a culturally responsive instructional model integrating the traditional Congklak game with structured vocabulary learning and multidimensional assessment. Addressing these gaps is expected to advance TEYL by providing empirical evidence on the effectiveness of a culturally grounded instructional model for improving vocabulary development and learner engagement in primary English classrooms.

Building upon these research gaps, this study introduces the COlourful CongkLAK (COLAK) model as a culturally responsive instructional model for vocabulary learning in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL). Unlike previous studies that used traditional games primarily as instructional media, the COLAK model transforms the Indonesian game of Congklak into a structured learning model consisting of three phases: pre-game vocabulary preparation, interactive game-based learning, and post-game reinforcement and reflection. Through these phases, learners develop vocabulary by recognizing target words, improving pronunciation, recalling meanings, and using vocabulary in meaningful contexts. The model also integrates local cultural content to promote meaningful learning while strengthening learners' appreciation of their cultural heritage. Furthermore, this study adopts a multidimensional approach to vocabulary development by examining four indicators such as word recognition, pronunciation accuracy, meaning recall, and contextual word use alongside learner engagement, including participation, peer interaction, enthusiasm, and responsiveness during learning activities. Therefore, this study contributes both theoretically and pedagogically by proposing an operational model of culturally responsive game-based vocabulary instruction that integrates local culture with evidence-based TEYL practices and provides practical guidance for primary English teachers.

Based on the identified research gaps, this study aims to investigate the implementation of the COlourful CongkLAK (COLAK) model for vocabulary learning in primary English classrooms within the context of Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL). Specifically, it examines how the COLAK model supports young learners' vocabulary development through culturally responsive game-based learning, explores the development of vocabulary in terms of word recognition, pronunciation accuracy, meaning recall, and contextual word use, and investigates learners' engagement through their participation, peer interaction, enthusiasm, and responsiveness during learning activities. By addressing these objectives, the study contributes empirical evidence to culturally responsive pedagogy and game-based learning in TEYL while providing practical guidance for integrating local cultural resources into vocabulary instruction. Accordingly, the study addresses the following research questions: (1) How does the implementation of the COLAK (COlourful CongkLAK) model support vocabulary development among young learners in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL)? (2) How do young learners' vocabulary abilities develop during the implementation of the COLAK model in terms of word recognition, pronunciation accuracy, meaning recall, and contextual word use? (3) How do young learners engage and participate during the implementation of the COLAK model in vocabulary learning activities?

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach supported by quantitative frequency analysis to explore how the implementation of the COlourful CongkLAK (COLAK) model supported English vocabulary development among young learners in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL). A descriptive qualitative design was chosen because the primary purpose of this study was to explore and describe how the COLAK model facilitated young learners' vocabulary development and classroom engagement within an authentic classroom context. Rather than examining causal relationships or testing hypotheses, the study sought to capture the learning process, students' interactions, and observable changes in vocabulary development throughout the implementation of the model. This design was therefore considered appropriate for providing an in-depth understanding of the instructional process and learners' experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To strengthen the qualitative findings, quantitative frequency analysis was incorporated to summarize students' performance across the observed learning sessions. The analysis focused on changes in five observation indicators: word recognition, pronunciation accuracy, meaning recall, contextual word use, and student engagement and participation. Students' performances were classified into four developmental levels such as Emerging (1), Developing (2), Competent (3), and Proficient (4) using a structured performance rubric. The frequency distribution of each category was then compared across learning sessions to identify patterns of vocabulary development during the implementation of the COLAK model. This combination of qualitative description and quantitative frequency analysis enabled a comprehensive interpretation of both the learning process and students' vocabulary development.

The observation checklist was developed based on key dimensions of vocabulary knowledge proposed by Nation (2022) and young learner classroom engagement indicators adapted from Shin & Crandall (2021). The checklist consisted of five observation indicators: (1) word recognition, referring to students' ability to correctly identify target vocabulary from picture cards and classroom prompts; (2) pronunciation accuracy, referring to the clarity and correctness of students' oral production of target words; (3) meaning recall, referring to students' ability to remember and explain the meanings of previously introduced vocabulary; (4) contextual word use, referring to students' ability to use target vocabulary appropriately in simple classroom interactions and game situations; and (5) student engagement and participation, referring to students' attention, willingness to participate, interaction with peers, and active involvement throughout the learning activities.

The study was conducted at SD Negeri 001 Rambah, a public primary school located in Rokan Hulu Regency, Riau Province, Indonesia, where English was introduced as part of students' early foreign language learning experiences. The participants consisted of 18 second-grade students aged 7–8 years, who were beginning to develop their basic English vocabulary. The participants were selected using purposive classroom sampling, as the class represented young learners whose English learning characteristics were consistent with the objectives of the study. The selection was also based on the teacher's recommendation and the students' regular participation in English learning activities. The study focused on students' English vocabulary development during the implementation of the COlourful CongkLAK (COLAK) model. Specifically, the observation emphasized five aspects of vocabulary development: word recognition, pronunciation accuracy, meaning recall, contextual word use, and student engagement and participation. Prior to data collection, permission was obtained from the school principal and classroom teacher, and informed consent was secured from the students' parents or guardians. To ensure research ethics, participants' identities were kept confidential, and all observation and video-recording data were used exclusively for research purposes.

The primary research instrument was a structured observation checklist designed to document students' English vocabulary development during the implementation of the COlourful CongkLAK (COLAK) model. The checklist consisted of five observation indicators: word recognition, pronunciation accuracy, meaning recall, contextual word use, and student engagement and participation. Each indicator was operationalized into observable classroom

behaviors and assessed using a four-level performance rubric comprising Emerging (1), Developing (2), Competent (3), and Proficient (4). The rubric enabled the researcher to systematically monitor students' learning progress across the implementation sessions. To enhance the credibility of the observation data, all classroom activities were supported by video recordings, which served as a secondary instrument to verify observation results, capture students' verbal and non-verbal interactions, and minimize the possibility of missed observations during classroom activities. The observation checklist and performance rubric were developed based on the study objectives and relevant literature on young learners' vocabulary development, ensuring that each indicator reflected the intended aspects of vocabulary learning assessed in this study. Prior to data collection, the instruments were reviewed by two experts in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) to ensure the clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of the observation indicators for primary school students.

Data were collected over a series of classroom learning sessions during the implementation of the COlourful CongkLAK (COLAK) model. Before the implementation, the researcher obtained permission from the school principal and classroom teacher, prepared the learning materials, validated the research instruments, and coordinated the observation procedures. During each learning session, the COLAK model was implemented through three instructional phases: pre-game vocabulary preparation, interactive game-based learning, and post-game vocabulary reinforcement and reflection. Throughout the activities, the researcher used a structured observation checklist to record students' performance on the five observation indicators: word recognition, pronunciation accuracy, meaning recall, contextual word use, and student engagement and participation. At the same time, all classroom activities were documented using video recordings to capture students' verbal and non-verbal interactions and to verify the observation results. Following each session, the observation notes and video recordings were reviewed and cross-checked to ensure the consistency and completeness of the data. The recorded data were then coded according to the predefined observation indicators and classified using the four-level performance rubric (Emerging, Developing, Competent, and Proficient) before being analyzed to identify patterns of vocabulary development and learner engagement throughout the implementation of the COLAK model.

The data were analyzed using descriptive qualitative analysis supported by quantitative frequency analysis. Observation notes and video recordings were first reviewed to identify students' vocabulary development during the implementation of the COlourful CongkLAK (COLAK) model. The data were then coded according to five predetermined indicators: word recognition, pronunciation accuracy, meaning recall, contextual word use, and student engagement and participation. Each student's performance was classified into one of four developmental levels i.e. Emerging (1), Developing (2), Competent (3), and Proficient (4) based on the performance assessment rubric. The frequency distributions were then compared across sessions to identify patterns of vocabulary development and changes in students' engagement during the implementation of the COLAK model. Finally, the quantitative frequency results were interpreted alongside the qualitative observation notes and video evidence to provide a comprehensive description of students' vocabulary development and classroom participation throughout the learning process.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The first research question examined how the implementation of the COlourful CongkLAK (COLAK) model supported vocabulary development among young learners in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL). The observation results demonstrated that most students reached the Competent and Proficient levels across the five observed indicators, indicating that the COLAK model effectively supported vocabulary learning in a culturally responsive and interactive classroom environment.

Table 1. Students' Vocabulary Development during the Implementation of the COLAK Model

Indicator	Emerging	Developing	Competent	Proficient	Total
Word Recognition	2	4	8	4	18
Pronunciation Accuracy	3	5	7	3	18
Meaning Recall	4	4	8	2	18
Contextual Word Use	4	6	6	2	18
Student Engagement	1	3	9	5	18

As shown in Table 1, word recognition demonstrated the strongest performance, with 12 students (66.7%) achieving the Competent and Proficient levels. Repeated vocabulary exposure through the COLAK activities, supported by picture cards, teacher modelling, and game interaction, helped students recognize target words more accurately. This finding is consistent with Shin & Crandall (2021), who argue that repeated and meaningful exposure to vocabulary through interactive activities promotes stronger lexical retention among young learners. It also supports Nation (2022) theory that vocabulary acquisition develops through multiple encounters with target words in meaningful contexts rather than through isolated memorization. The repeated interaction embedded in the COLAK model therefore provided opportunities for learners to strengthen their receptive vocabulary knowledge while maintaining active classroom engagement. Classroom observations showed that during the second and third learning sessions, most students were able to identify the vocabulary on the picture cards without teacher assistance. Several students also spontaneously repeated the target words while waiting for their turns, indicating increasing familiarity with the vocabulary. A similar trend was found in pronunciation accuracy, where 10 students (55.6%) reached the Competent and Proficient levels. Repeated pronunciation practice and immediate feedback from teachers and peers improved students' confidence and pronunciation accuracy.

This improvement is consistent with the findings of Hapsari & Elyas (2022), who reported that game-based language learning encourages repeated oral production and increases learners' confidence in using English. From a sociocultural perspective, peer interaction and teacher scaffolding during the COLAK activities supported learners' pronunciation development through collaborative practice, making vocabulary learning more meaningful and interactive. Observation notes also revealed that students initially hesitated to pronounce unfamiliar English words. However, after several rounds of the COLAK activities, they became more confident and were willing to repeat the words aloud with support from their peers and teacher. For meaning recall, 10 students (55.6%) achieved the Competent and Proficient levels. Associating vocabulary with pictures, objects, and game situations enabled students to recall word meanings more effectively than rote memorization. This finding supports Cameron (2001) view that young learners acquire vocabulary more effectively when words are associated with concrete objects, visual representations, and meaningful classroom experiences. Likewise, Nation (2022) emphasizes that vocabulary retention improves when learners repeatedly encounter words in authentic and engaging contexts. The use of picture cards within the COLAK activities enabled students to establish stronger connections between vocabulary forms and meanings. During the observation, many students could recall previously introduced vocabulary when encountering the same picture cards in subsequent game rounds, suggesting that repeated contextual exposure strengthened their memory of the target words.

Contextual word use showed the lowest performance, with eight students (44.4%) reaching the Competent and Proficient levels. Although this remained the most challenging indicator, students gradually began using target vocabulary appropriately during classroom interactions. This result is understandable because productive vocabulary knowledge generally develops after receptive vocabulary knowledge has been established (Nation, 2022). Similar findings were reported by Alqahtani (2019), who explained that learners require repeated opportunities to use newly acquired vocabulary in meaningful communicative situations before they can produce it accurately and confidently. The highest achievement was observed in student engagement, with 14 students (77.8%) attaining the Competent and

Proficient levels. Students actively participated in the game, collaborated with peers, and responded enthusiastically throughout the learning activities, suggesting that the traditional Congklak game created an enjoyable and interactive learning environment. This finding aligns with Gay (2021) framework of culturally responsive pedagogy, which emphasizes that learning becomes more meaningful when instructional activities reflect learners' cultural backgrounds and everyday experiences. Because the COLAK model was adapted from a familiar traditional game, students participated naturally, interacted actively with their peers, and remained engaged throughout the learning process. These findings also support Shin & Crandall (2021), who argue that game-based learning promotes motivation, collaboration, and sustained participation among young learners. Classroom observations further indicated that students eagerly waited for their turns, encouraged their classmates during the game, and celebrated correct answers together. These interactions created a collaborative learning atmosphere that maintained students' engagement throughout the lesson. Overall, the findings indicate that the COLAK model effectively supported vocabulary development through repeated practice, meaningful interaction, collaborative learning, and culturally relevant experiences. The model enhanced both students' vocabulary development and classroom engagement, supporting previous research on game-based learning and culturally responsive pedagogy in TEYL.

The second research question explored how young learners' vocabulary abilities developed during the implementation of the COlourful CongkLAK (COLAK) model in terms of word recognition, pronunciation accuracy, meaning recall, and contextual word use. The observation results indicate that students demonstrated varying levels of vocabulary development across the four indicators, with most students achieving the Competent and Proficient levels.

Table 2. Distribution of Students' Vocabulary Development Across the Four Indicators

Vocabulary Indicator	Emerging	Developing	Competent	Proficient	Competent + Proficient
Word Recognition	2	4	8	4	12 (66.7%)
Pronunciation Accuracy	3	5	7	3	10 (55.6%)
Meaning Recall	4	4	8	2	10 (55.6%)
Contextual Word Use	4	6	6	2	8 (44.4%)

As shown in Table 2, word recognition was the strongest vocabulary indicator, with 12 students (66.7%) reaching the Competent and Proficient levels. Repeated vocabulary exposure through pictures, teacher modelling, and game interactions improved students' ability to recognize target words. Pronunciation accuracy and meaning recall also showed positive results, with 10 students (55.6%) achieving the Competent and Proficient levels for each indicator. Repeated oral practice and contextual learning through the COLAK activities enhanced students' pronunciation and their ability to recall word meanings. Contextual word use remained the most challenging indicator, with eight students (44.4%) reaching the Competent and Proficient levels. Nevertheless, students gradually became more confident in using English vocabulary during classroom interactions. Overall, vocabulary development was evident across all four indicators, although receptive skills developed more strongly than productive skills. The COLAK model supported this development by providing repeated exposure, meaningful interaction, and culturally relevant learning experiences, demonstrating its potential to promote both receptive and productive vocabulary learning among young learners.

The third research question examined how young learners engaged and participated during the implementation of the COLAK model in vocabulary learning activities. Classroom observations revealed a high level of student engagement throughout the learning process. Most students actively participated in the learning activities, interacted positively with their peers, responded enthusiastically to the teacher's instructions, and remained involved during the implementation of the COLAK model.

Table 3. Students' Engagement during the Implementation of the COLAK

Engagement Level	Frequency	Percentage
Emerging	1	5.6%
Developing	3	16.7%
Competent	9	50%
Proficient	5	27.8%
Total	18	100%

As presented in Table 3, 14 of the 18 students (77.8%) achieved the Competent and Proficient levels, while only four students (22.3%) remained at the Emerging and Developing levels. These results indicate that the COLAK model effectively promoted active student engagement during vocabulary learning. Classroom observations showed that students participated enthusiastically throughout the pre-game, interactive game, and post-game phases. For example, during the interactive game phase, students voluntarily answered vocabulary questions, reminded their peers of the game rules, and repeated target vocabulary aloud while moving the Congklak pieces. These behaviours reflected active participation, peer collaboration, and sustained attention during the learning activities. They actively responded to vocabulary instruction, collaborated with peers, followed the game rules, and confidently practiced English vocabulary while playing the traditional Congklak game. Overall, the findings suggest that the COLAK model enhanced both learner engagement and vocabulary learning by creating an enjoyable, collaborative, and culturally responsive learning environment. The familiar traditional game encouraged active participation, reduced learning anxiety, and strengthened students' motivation to use English during classroom activities, highlighting its potential as an effective instructional approach for primary English classrooms.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that the COLAK model provides a culturally responsive approach to English vocabulary instruction for young learners by integrating structured vocabulary practice with meaningful interaction, collaboration, and local cultural contexts. The findings show that the model supports vocabulary acquisition while promoting active participation and sustained learner engagement. Theoretically, this study contributes to culturally responsive pedagogy and Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) by showing that traditional games can serve as structured instructional models rather than supplementary learning activities. It also highlights the role of repeated exposure, meaningful interaction, and cultural familiarity in vocabulary development. Pedagogically, the COLAK model offers teachers a practical framework for integrating local traditional games into vocabulary instruction while preserving cultural values. However, the study was limited to one class of 18 second-grade students using a descriptive qualitative design. Future research should involve larger samples, mixed-methods or longitudinal designs, and broader educational contexts to further validate the model's effectiveness and applicability.

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