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Research Article

Building Vocabulary and Confidence in Speaking through Alphabet Box Learning in EFL Classrooms

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Abstract: This research focuses on improving English vocabulary and speaking confidence among students in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms through the implementation of Alphabet Box Learning. Many EFL students struggle with limited vocabulary and a lack of confidence when speaking, which hinders their communicative competence. The objective of this study was to examine the effectiveness of Alphabet Box Learning in addressing these problems by providing an engaging and student-centered learning experience. The study employed a quasi-experimental method involving 65 students of SMP Kristen 1 Soe. Data were collected through pre-tests and post-tests, classroom observations, and student questionnaires to assess improvements in vocabulary mastery and speaking confidence. The findings revealed that students who participated in Alphabet Box Learning activities showed significant gains in vocabulary acquisition and their willingness to speak in class were increased. The interactive nature of the method, which combines visual, tactile, and verbal elements, created a supportive environment that encouraged active participation and reduced speaking anxiety. In conclusion, Alphabet Box Learning is an effective instructional strategy for enhancing both vocabulary and speaking confidence among EFL learners. Its implementation provides meaningful, engaging, and low-anxiety language learning experiences, making it a valuable addition to communicative language teaching practices.

Keywords: Vocabulary; Speaking Confidence; Alphabet Box; EFL Students

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1. Introduction

In the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, the ability to speak fluently and confidently is often seen as the ultimate goal for learners. However, for many students, especially in early or rural EFL settings, speaking remains one of the most challenging skills to develop. This is largely due to two interconnected problems: a limited vocabulary base and a lack of confidence to express ideas orally. When students are not equipped with sufficient vocabulary, they often struggle to articulate their thoughts, leading to hesitation, anxiety, and fear of making mistakes [1], [2], [3]. This psychological barrier, known as speaking anxiety, becomes a serious obstacle to meaningful communication in English. Therefore, effective instructional strategies must simultaneously address both the cognitive aspect of vocabulary development and the affective aspect of speaking confidence.

Conventional teaching methods often separate vocabulary learning from speaking activities. Vocabulary is commonly taught through memorization or textbook lists, while speaking is left to occasional role-plays or dialogues [4], [5]. This fragmented approach does not support the development of spontaneous language use, as students may know individual words but lack the fluency to use them effectively in real-time conversations. Moreover, classroom environments that emphasize correctness over creativity may further discourage students from speaking freely. Hence, there is a growing need for engaging, learner-centered activities that integrate vocabulary learning with active speaking practice, all within a supportive, low-anxiety environment.

Alphabet Box Learning emerges as a promising approach that addresses these needs [6] . It is a simple yet powerful tool where students draw letters from a box and generate words, sentences, or even stories based on the letters they choose. This interactive activity serves multiple purposes. It reinforces vocabulary recall, improves pronunciation, and encourages spontaneous speech. The gamified nature of Alphabet Box tasks also enhances student motivation and reduces the fear of speaking, allowing learners to express themselves with greater confidence [7], [8]. Because it can be adapted to different proficiency levels and learning objectives, Alphabet Box Learning offers a versatile solution for teachers working with diverse groups of students.

This research aims to explore how Alphabet Box Learning can be effectively implemented in EFL classrooms to build vocabulary and foster speaking confidence among students. It investigates not only the impact on language performance but also the psychological effects on learner attitudes and willingness to speak. By integrating cognitive and affective learning goals into one activity, Alphabet Box Learning represents a holistic approach to oral language development. The findings of this study are expected to offer valuable insights for teachers, curriculum designers, and policymakers seeking innovative, cost-effective strategies to improve English speaking skills in EFL contexts with limited resources.

2. Preliminaries or Related Work or Literature Review

Several prior studies have explored the role of alphabet-based tools and visual media in enhancing vocabulary and speaking skills in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. These works provide a valuable foundation, yet they differ in terms of target learners, media used, research methods, and language skills emphasized — which helps position the uniqueness of the current study.

Yuliawati & Faida [9] investigated the use of the Alphabet Box as a media for letter pronunciation among first-grade primary students in Indonesia. Their research emphasized early phonemic awareness, showing that Alphabet Box media effectively improved students' ability to distinguish similar-sounding or visually confusing letters such as b/d and p/q. While their findings support the pedagogical value of Alphabet Box activities, the focus was limited to alphabet recognition and pronunciation, with no measurement of vocabulary expansion or speaking performance.

In contrast, Destianingsih & Satria [10] conducted a quasi-experimental study involving Business Administration students at the tertiary level. Their research utilized alphabet cards as learning aids for vocabulary enrichment. The results revealed a significant gain in vocabulary scores for the experimental group (Mean post-test: 78.85) compared to the control group (Mean: 59.04), suggesting a positive impact of alphabet-based strategies. However, the study did not target speaking confidence or fluency as outcomes, nor was the intervention interactive or game-based in nature.

Other studies in the field of vocabulary from Maji & Bawawa [11], [12] have highlighted the value of vocabulary games and student-centered learning environments in promoting motivation and retention. However, these methods often require structured games or digital resources and may not integrate vocabulary development directly with speaking tasks. Moreover, most of these studies focus either on vocabulary or speaking skills in isolation, without exploring the interdependence between the two in a single intervention.

In contrast to the above studies, the present research focuses specifically on junior high school students in an EFL context, a demographic that is ready for abstract language use yet still in need of structured, engaging methods for vocabulary development. Unlike earlier works, this study combines vocabulary learning with oral practice in a single, integrated approach using Alphabet Box Learning. This method encourages learners to retrieve vocabulary items starting from randomly selected letters and to immediately use those words in oral speaking tasks, games, or storytelling.

Another key difference lies in the measured outcomes. While previous research largely focused on vocabulary tests or pronunciation, this study incorporates a three-pronged assessment: vocabulary tests, speaking confidence questionnaires, and rubric-based oral performance evaluations. This allows for a more comprehensive analysis of how Alphabet Box Learning supports both linguistic and affective dimensions of EFL learning.

Finally, this study is distinguished by its applicability to low-tech, real-world classrooms. Unlike game-based apps or digital tools, the Alphabet Box can be implemented in resource-limited schools with minimal preparation and cost. This makes it especially relevant for rural or underfunded contexts, like many found in eastern Indonesia.

3. Proposed Method

This study used a quasi-experimental research design to examine the effectiveness of Alphabet Box Learning in improving vocabulary acquisition and speaking confidence among EFL students at SMP Kristen 1 Soe. The primary goal is to measure the differences in student outcomes before and after the implementation of the Alphabet Box strategy, as compared to conventional teaching methods. Quasi-experimental designs are appropriate when random assignment of participants to groups is not feasible, particularly in school-based settings where classes are already formed [13], [14]. This design enables a practical and ethical way to compare the learning gains between experimental and control groups while maintaining the structure of existing classrooms.

The research involved three intact classes with a total of 65 students, divided as follows: Class A served as the control group, receiving traditional instruction methods such as textbook-based vocabulary drills and teacher-led speaking activities. Meanwhile, Class B and Class C served as experimental groups, engaging in Alphabet Box Learning. This intervention involved interactive, student-centered tasks such as letter-based vocabulary games, word retrieval challenges, and oral activities based on randomly drawn letters from the Alphabet Box. The intervention period will span four to six weeks, with regular sessions integrated into the English curriculum.

To assess the impact of the intervention, three main instruments were used there. First, a Vocabulary Test administered before and after the intervention to evaluate vocabulary acquisition. This test covered target vocabulary aligned with the syllabus and include both recognition and productive vocabulary tasks. Second, a Speaking Confidence Questionnaire, using a 5-point Likert scale. It was given to students to self-assess their confidence in speaking English. This instrument explored dimensions of willingness to speak, anxiety levels, and perceived ability to express ideas. Third, students performed an oral task, evaluated through an Oral Speaking Performance Rubric. The rubric assessed key components such as fluency, vocabulary usage, pronunciation, and coherence, providing an objective measure of speaking ability.

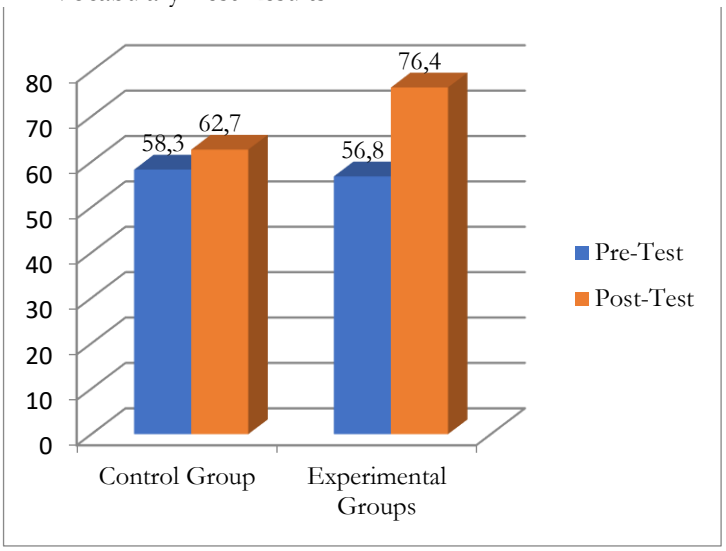
For data analysis, paired sample t-tests was used to compare pre-test and post-test scores within each group, determining whether there was a statistically significant improvement in vocabulary and speaking confidence or not. Additionally, ANCOVA (Analysis of Covariance) was employed to compare post-test scores between the experimental and control groups while controlling for pre-test differences [15] . This allowed for a more accurate understanding of the treatment effect. The strength of the intervention's impact also be measured using Cohen's d, which provides the effect size and helps interpret the magnitude of learning gains. A large effect size (e.g., $d > 0.8$) would indicate that Alphabet Box Learning has a strong and meaningful impact on students' language development.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

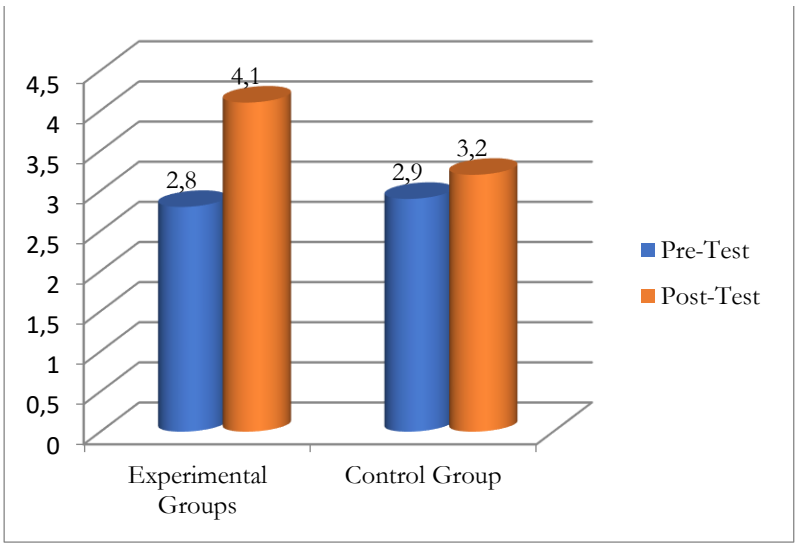
The study involved 65 students from SMP Kristen 1 Soe, divided into three classes: one control group (Class A, 22 students) and two experimental groups (Classes B and C, 43 students). All participants took a pre-test and post-test in vocabulary and completed a speaking confidence questionnaire. Their oral performance was also assessed using a rubric evaluating fluency, vocabulary use, and pronunciation.

1. Vocabulary Test Results



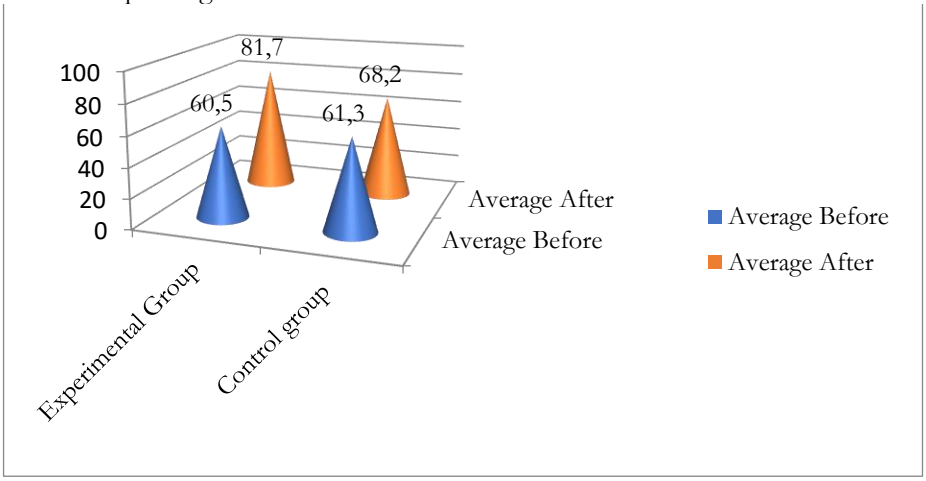
The control group's average vocabulary score increased slightly from 58.3 (pre-test) to 62.7 (post-test). Meanwhile, the experimental groups showed a significant improvement: from an average of 56.8 (pre-test) to 76.4 (post-test). A paired sample t-test showed the difference in the experimental groups was statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), while the improvement in the control group was not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$).

2. Speaking Confidence Questionnaire



The experimental groups also reported a marked increase in their speaking confidence. On a 5-point Likert scale, the average confidence score increased from 2.8 to 4.1, while the control group saw a smaller increase from 2.9 to 3.2. Statistical analysis using ANCOVA showed that the post-test confidence scores were significantly higher in the experimental groups compared to the control group, even after adjusting for pre-test scores ($F = 12.34$, $p < 0.001$).

3. Oral Speaking Performance



Using a rubric-based assessment, students in the experimental groups demonstrated greater improvement in fluency, vocabulary usage, and pronunciation. The average rubric score in the experimental groups increased from 60.5 to 81.7, while in the control group it rose from 61.3 to 68.2. The effect size (Cohen's d) for vocabulary performance and speaking confidence in the experimental group was 1.12 (large effect), suggesting Alphabet Box Learning had a strong impact.

4.2 Discussion

The results of this quasi-experimental study indicated that the Alphabet Box Learning strategy has a meaningful and statistically significant effect on enhancing students' vocabulary mastery and confidence in speaking English. This is particularly relevant in the context of junior high school EFL learners, where vocabulary limitations and communication anxiety are common barriers to oral proficiency.

1. Vocabulary Development and Retention

The vocabulary test scores of the experimental groups revealed substantial gains, far exceeding those of the control group. This outcome supports the assertion that alphabet-based learning strategies—such as the Alphabet Box—offer more than mere rote memorization. Instead, they foster active engagement with language, enabling students to construct vocabulary knowledge through playful and meaningful interaction with words. Unlike conventional methods, which often rely heavily on repetition and textbook drills, Alphabet Box activities encourage learners to make personal connections with words by associating them with letters, themes, or categories they physically draw from the box.

These findings align with the research from Yuliawati & Faida [9], and Destianingsih & Satria [10] both of whom emphasized the effectiveness of alphabet-driven and visual-based strategies for improving vocabulary knowledge. Such strategies cater to multiple learning styles—visual, kinesthetic, and auditory—thus increasing the likelihood of vocabulary being deeply encoded and retained in long-term memory. When students physically interact with lettered cards and generate vocabulary through guided exploration or collaborative games, the process becomes experiential, which is known to enhance retention and recall.

2. Improvement in Speaking Confidence

Equally significant is the marked increase in the students' speaking confidence, as reflected in both self-reported questionnaire results and observable behaviors during oral activities. Students in the experimental groups expressed greater willingness to speak, decreased fear of making mistakes, and increased enjoyment when participating in English-speaking tasks. The alphabet-based learning model creates an environment where language use is contextualized, playful, and low-pressure—key conditions that research has shown are essential for reducing speaking anxiety in EFL settings [16], [17].

The effectiveness of Alphabet Box Learning in promoting confidence can be attributed to its student-centered, interactive nature. Unlike traditional instruction that often places emphasis on correct grammar and pronunciation in a formal setting (which can intimidate learners), the Alphabet Box encourages exploration and risk-taking. Students are not penalized for errors but rather supported through peer collaboration, laughter, and guided facilitation by the teacher. This reflects the findings from recent classroom-based studies, which advocate communicative, low-anxiety environments to boost students' willingness to speak in a second language.

3. Oral Proficiency and Communicative Competence

In addition to test and questionnaire data, the improvement in the oral speaking performance scores further confirms the impact of Alphabet Box Learning on students' communicative ability. The post-intervention rubric assessments showed clear gains in fluency, lexical range, and pronunciation clarity. These outcomes suggest that the intervention not only increased students' passive vocabulary knowledge but also activated their ability to use new vocabulary in spontaneous speech [18], [19].

This shift from receptive to productive vocabulary use is especially critical in EFL contexts, where students often struggle to transfer what they learn in written or controlled tasks into actual conversation. Alphabet Box Learning serves as a bridge between the two, as it requires students to draw random letters, recall associated words, and formulate oral sentences or dialogues. This kind of spontaneous language use mirrors authentic communication and helps students build fluency, an essential component of communicative competence.

Furthermore, the alphabet-based tasks often involve collaborative learning, where students support each other in completing challenges or group games. This promotes peer interaction, corrective feedback, and language scaffolding, all of which contribute to more natural and confident use of English. These social dynamics are not always present in traditional instruction but are central to communicative and confidence-building approaches.

4. Pedagogical Implications and Broader Significance

The overall findings of this study present compelling evidence for the integration of Alphabet Box Learning in junior high school EFL instruction. In environments where students often enter the classroom with limited exposure to English and a lack of motivation to speak, interactive and multisensory methods such as Alphabet Box activities offer a refreshing and effective alternative to traditional techniques. They provide multiple points of entry for different types of learners and foster a supportive atmosphere where speaking English becomes a fun, engaging, and meaningful activity.

These results also highlight a broader pedagogical implication: effective language learning is not only about increasing knowledge but also about building learner confidence and creating a positive emotional experience. When students feel safe, encouraged, and excited about learning, their willingness to engage with the language increases dramatically. Thus, Alphabet Box Learning aligns with modern principles of constructivist and communicative language teaching, making it a highly adaptable and valuable tool for EFL teachers, especially in middle school settings.

5. Comparison

The results of this quasi-experimental study show that Alphabet Box Learning improves both vocabulary mastery and students' confidence in speaking English in an EFL context. This improvement was seen across three domains: vocabulary test scores, speaking confidence (measured by a Likert-scale questionnaire), and oral performance (based on rubric-based assessment). The positive effect was pronounced in the experimental groups that received the Alphabet Box intervention, compared to the control group that received conventional instruction.

Comparison with State-of-the-Art Approaches

Current state-of-the-art methods in EFL vocabulary development and speaking instruction emphasize task-based language teaching (TBLT), game-based learning, and multisensory engagement [20]. These approaches aim to increase retention, motivation, and communicative competence by providing contextual, meaningful language use and encouraging active learner participation. Alphabet Box Learning aligns well with these pedagogical principles but

also offers a low-cost, flexible, and accessible alternative—especially useful for under-resourced or rural schools.

In comparison to digital game-based learning platforms or technologically sophisticated tools (e.g., vocabulary learning apps, AI-powered speech tutors), Alphabet Box Learning leverages simple tactile and visual tools—such as letter cards and physical boxes—yet yields similarly strong effects. This supports research by [21], [22] who found that alphabet-structured tools enhanced vocabulary recall and pronunciation in young EFL learners. Unlike digital platforms that may require infrastructure, Alphabet Box Learning is highly adaptable, making it ideal for classroom contexts like SMP Kristen 1 Soe.

While earlier studies from Yolageldili & Arikan (2011) [23] emphasized traditional vocabulary games (e.g., matching, puzzles), Alphabet Box Learning introduces an additional element of spontaneity and creativity which is requiring students to retrieve, generate, and orally apply words starting from a randomly drawn letter. This feature increases cognitive demand and communicative authenticity, potentially leading to higher-order language processing, as supported by Bloom's Taxonomy-based EFL strategies.

The improvement in speaking confidence also reflects newer understandings of affective factors in language learning. Recent studies [24] argue that emotional variables like anxiety, confidence, and motivation are important as linguistic input in determining learner success. Alphabet Box Learning's playful and collaborative nature creates a safe, low-anxiety learning environment, consistent with these findings and surpassing the outcomes of traditional teacher-centered methods.

In summary, compared to existing strategies in the field, this study presents a novel, measurable contribution by demonstrating that a simple, analog method like Alphabet Box Learning can generate comparable, if not superior, gains in vocabulary mastery and speaking confidence, particularly in junior high school EFL settings with limited technological access. Its integration of tactile, visual, and oral practice offers a balanced and practical model for inclusive, resource-aware language teaching—a gap often left unaddressed in technology-driven pedagogies.

6. Conclusions

This study concludes that Alphabet Box Learning is an effective and innovative instructional strategy for enhancing both vocabulary acquisition and speaking confidence among EFL students. Based on a quasi-experimental design involving 65 students from three junior high school classes, the results demonstrated that students who engaged in Alphabet Box activities showed significantly higher improvements in vocabulary test scores, greater speaking fluency, and increased self-confidence in speaking English compared to those taught through conventional methods.

The data clearly reveal that the interactive and multisensory nature of Alphabet Box Learning supports deeper engagement with language. Students were not only able to recognize and recall vocabulary more effectively but also to use it productively in oral communication. The playful and collaborative elements of the Alphabet Box created a low-anxiety, student-centered learning environment, which in turn helped reduce fear of speaking and encouraged participation. These findings align with contemporary principles in language education that emphasize learner autonomy, active participation, and emotional support in the classroom.

Moreover, when compared to current state-of-the-art methods such as digital game-based learning or task-based instruction, Alphabet Box Learning stands out as a cost-effective, low-tech solution that delivers measurable benefits in under-resourced or traditional classroom settings. Its adaptability and ease of implementation make it especially valuable for EFL teachers seeking practical tools to improve both language proficiency and learner confidence.

In conclusion, Alphabet Box Learning offers a powerful pedagogical approach for junior high school EFL contexts. It not only addresses core linguistic skills such as vocabulary development but also tackles the psychological aspects of language learning, particularly the confidence to speak. Based on these findings, educators are encouraged to adopt and further explore Alphabet Box Learning as a supplementary or primary technique in their English teaching practices.

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