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USING WORD CARDS IN SUPPORTING ENGLISH VOCABULARY LEARNING AMONG THE 4TH GRADERS

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Abstract

English vocabulary learning plays a vital role in developing primary school learners' English language proficiency. This study investigates the effectiveness of word cards in enhancing students' vocabulary knowledge and explores their perceptions of word card activities in a primary school context. An action research design employing a two-cycle model was adopted, integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods. The participants were 30 Grade four students from a primary school in Dong Thap Province, located in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. Data were collected through vocabulary tests, classroom observations, and focus group interviews conducted across the two intervention cycles. The findings indicated a gradual improvement in students' vocabulary performance following the integration of guided speaking activities in Cycle Two. Furthermore, students became more active, confident, and willing to participate in vocabulary learning activities. These findings suggest that integrating word cards with communicative activities is a practical and effective approach to supporting English vocabulary learning and teaching in primary school classrooms.

Keywords: *action research, primary school students, word cards, vocabulary learning.*

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SỬ DỤNG THẺ TỪ VỰNG NHẪM HỖ TRỢ VIỆC HỌC TỪ VỰNG TIẾNG ANH CHO HỌC SINH LỚP 4

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Tóm tắt:

Việc học từ vựng tiếng Anh đóng vai trò nền tảng giúp học sinh tiểu học phát triển năng lực ngôn ngữ. Nghiên cứu này được thực hiện nhằm đánh giá mức độ hỗ trợ của thẻ từ vựng đối với việc học tiếng Anh, đồng thời tìm hiểu cảm nhận của học sinh về quá trình tích hợp. Nghiên cứu đã sử dụng mô hình hành động gồm hai chu kỳ, kết hợp phương pháp định lượng và định tính. Đối tượng tham gia gồm 30 học sinh lớp bốn tại một trường tiểu học thuộc tỉnh Đồng Tháp, vùng Đồng bằng sông Cửu Long. Dữ liệu được thu thập thông qua các bài kiểm tra từ vựng, quan sát lớp học và phỏng vấn nhóm. Kết quả cho thấy kết quả học từ vựng của học sinh tiến bộ dần sau khi các hoạt động giao tiếp có hướng dẫn được tích hợp vào Chu kỳ Hai. Bên cạnh đó, học sinh cũng trở nên hào hứng, tự tin và sẵn sàng tham gia vào các hoạt động học từ vựng hơn. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy việc kết hợp thẻ từ vựng với các hoạt động giao tiếp sẽ là một phương pháp phù hợp để hỗ trợ việc dạy học từ vựng.

Từ khóa: *học sinh tiểu học, học từ vựng, nghiên cứu hành động, thẻ từ vựng.*

1. Introduction

Vocabulary plays a particularly important role among the different language components because it impacts the learners' proficiency (Sari & Aminatun, 2021). According to Nation (2022), vocabulary knowledge is central to language use and language learning because learners need words to express meanings effectively. For young learners, vocabulary learning is especially important because they are still developing their basic language foundation and need sufficient vocabulary to understand lessons and participate in classroom activities (Sahin & Yavuz, 2025).

However, teaching and learning English vocabulary in primary schools still face many challenges, especially in limited-resource educational settings. Most students at My Phong Primary School in Dong Thap Province come from working-class families, and many parents have limited time or financial conditions to send their children to private English centers after school hours. In addition, the school has relatively modest teaching facilities, with limited access to modern technology and digital learning tools. Most students in this rural Vietnamese context exhibited low confidence and limited active participation in oral production due to their limited vocabulary and inaccurate pronunciation (Tu & Nhi, 2026). These challenges suggest the need for practical, low-cost, and engaging teaching resources that are suitable for these learners.

For vocabulary learning, teachers are encouraged to use interactive and visually attractive teaching materials. Young learners tend to learn more effectively when classroom activities include repetition, games, peer interaction, and visual support (Cameron, 2001). Therefore, vocabulary teaching should not focus only on memorization but should also provide opportunities for meaningful practice and communicative use. Previous studies have shown that word cards can positively support vocabulary learning and teaching. They are simple learning materials containing English words together with supporting information such as pronunciation, stress, meaning, or simple pictures. They are portable, flexible, and easy to use in both classroom and home-study activities. According to Nation (2022), word cards can support vocabulary retention because they encourage review of vocabulary items. Furthermore, word cards help students improve pronunciation, review vocabulary regularly, participate more actively in games and pair work, and use vocabulary in simple communicative sentences. Similarly, Agustina et al. (2023) reported that word-card activities improved third-grade students' vocabulary mastery and increased their participation and motivation during English lessons. The study further showed a gradual improvement in students' scores across learning cycles. Nova et al. (2024) found that the use of word cards significantly improved students' vocabulary achievement while students also became more enthusiastic and actively involved in classroom activities. Moreover, the above studies emphasized that word cards created a more interactive and enjoyable learning environment, helping students pay greater attention and participate more actively in the vocabulary learning process.

There is still limited research exploring how primary school students in the Mekong Delta experience word card-based vocabulary learning. To address this gap, the present classroom action research aimed to examine the effects of using word cards on English vocabulary learning among fourth graders at My Phong Primary School in Dong Thap Province. The study also explored students' perceptions of teaching and learning vocabulary through word cards. Specifically, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. To what extent do word cards support Grade 4 learners' English vocabulary learning?

2. *What are the students' perceptions of using word cards in supporting English vocabulary learning among the 4th graders?*

2. Literature Review

2.1 Vocabulary

2.1.1. Definition of Vocabulary

Vocabulary has long been recognized as an essential component of language learning and communication. Richards and Renandya (2002) stated that vocabulary is a core component of language proficiency and provides the foundation for the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Besides, Richards (2000) also pointed out that vocabulary has become one of the central areas of research in language teaching and applied linguistics. Moreover, vocabulary refers to the collection of words that individuals can use in a specific language (Nguyen, 2026), while Zheng (2024) emphasized that vocabulary includes both words and their meanings, helping individuals and groups communicate effectively. These definitions show that vocabulary is not only a collection of words but also a fundamental element that supports language proficiency and successful communication.

2.1.2. Aspects of vocabulary knowledge

Researchers have identified several important aspects of vocabulary knowledge, including Form, Meaning, and Use. First, word formation is also connected with suffixes and prefixes (Harmer, 2001). The spelling system consists of morphology, etymology and phonology (Devonshire & Fluck, 2010). Second, words can have multiple meanings in different contexts. Word meaning can also depend on collocations, the way in which words co-occur, or are used together. Students have to understand the different meanings of the words in different ways (Harmer, 2001). The last one, using words in the real context, has many ways to convey. Effective vocabulary use includes using the right words in the right context and employing appropriate expressions and grammatical structures to communicate effectively.

According to Nation (2022), there are three significant aspects of the word. First, the Form of the word involved pronunciation (spoken form), spelling (written form) and word parts (including prefix, root and suffix). Second, Nation (2022) stated Form and Meaning work with each other, and associations that the mind forms when people think about specific words and expressions. Finally, Nation (2022) stated both receptive and productive dimensions, which knowing three aspects involves 18 different types of lexical knowledge. This study was supported by the findings of Nation (2022), including Form, Meaning, and Use. Therefore, these aspects show that learning vocabulary involves more than memorizing words, as learners need to understand Form, Meaning, and Use in an integrated way.

2.1.3. The importance of vocabulary

Vocabulary plays an important role in helping young learners develop communication skills in English (Alqahtani, 2015; Nation, 2022). First, vocabulary knowledge enables them to understand meaning and express ideas more effectively in classroom interactions and everyday communication (Cameron, 2001). It also supports the development of the four language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Wilkins, 1972; Nation, 2022). In addition, vocabulary knowledge contributes to communicative competence because learners need appropriate words to participate successfully in meaningful communication (Canale & Swain, 1980). Finally, previous studies have shown that learners with richer vocabulary are generally more confident and effective language users (Alqahtani, 2015; Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020). Therefore, vocabulary instruction should be an essential part of

English teaching. In short, developing vocabulary knowledge is fundamental to improving language skills and the use of communicative vocabulary.

2.1.4. Teaching English to young learners

For the successful teaching of English in primary schools, it is essential for the teacher to understand the young learners' characteristics, instincts, and interests in their cognitive, linguistic, and emotional aspects. Young learners are active and curious learners who acquire language more effectively through meaningful, hands-on experiences than through abstract explanations (Cameron, 2001; Scott & Ytreberg, 1995). They respond positively to visual, enjoyable, and interactive activities, such as games and collaborative tasks, which help sustain their motivation and engagement (Pinter, 2017). However, because their attention span is relatively short, learning activities should be varied and developmentally appropriate (Scott & Ytreberg, 1995). In addition, young learners benefit from repeated exposure and opportunities to use language in meaningful contexts, which support vocabulary retention and language development (Nation, 2022). Thus, these characteristics suggest that vocabulary teaching for young learners should be meaningful, engaging, and connected to real-life contexts.

Vocabulary teaching for young learners should be designed through enjoyable and meaningful activities that support children's different learning styles and experiences. According to Read (2003), effective vocabulary learning should be natural, contextualized, enjoyable, and meaningful for children. Teachers cannot expect our young students to learn the items we teach and remember all the words in the lessons. Although children can learn new words very quickly, they will also forget them quickly. Therefore, new words should be introduced repeatedly in different situations in the following lessons (Nation, 2022). Since mere practicing can be extremely boring and tiring to young learners, teachers should be creative enough to wrap practicing in games, role plays, and singing songs, activities that seem to be fun and interesting. Furthermore, vocabulary instruction for young learners should involve multisensory, interactive, and socially engaging activities that maintain attention and reduce cognitive overload (Cameron, 2001; Pinter, 2017). To sum up, children bring many different experiences and knowledge to their learning, and it is likely that each child learns differently from the same activity they are involved in (Scott, 1995).

2.2. Word Cards in English Teaching and Learning

2.2.1. Definition of word cards

Word cards are small cards that help students remember new words and meanings more easily. They can contribute to creating an interesting and supportive learning environment in vocabulary lessons. In their simplest form, word cards display the target vocabulary on one side and its native language equivalent on the reverse. Beyond this basic structure, both learners and teachers can customize the cards by adding extra linguistic details (Wilkinson, 2020). In addition, students can use word cards to review vocabulary regularly and improve memory retention (Lei & Reynolds, 2022).

2.2.2. Using word cards in English teaching and learning

Using word cards is an effective method for teaching and learning English vocabulary (Nation, 1994; Nation, 2022). It is an effective strategy for improving learners' vocabulary acquisition and memory retention (Nation, 2022; Thornbury, 2006). First, learners write a new word on one side of a small card, usually the size of a business card, and write its translation in their mother tongue on the other side. A set of cards should normally contain between 20 and 50 words, depending on the difficulty level of the vocabulary. The words also need not belong to the same lexical set, allowing learners to study different types of vocabulary at the

same time. Learners can test themselves by looking at the new word and trying to recall its meaning, or by using the translation to remember the English word form. Moreover, words that are difficult to understand or pronounce should be placed at the top of the pile so that they can be reviewed more frequently. The review process should also be spaced over time to strengthen long-term memory (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020). As learners acquire new vocabulary, old cards can be removed and replaced with new ones to maintain an active and useful collection of vocabulary cards. Furthermore, while early techniques of using word cards primarily focused on linking isolated words with their first language translations, recent literature suggests that vocabulary items should not be learned in complete isolation. As Nation (2022) strongly emphasized, vocabulary learning through word cards achieves its maximum efficiency when the target words are embedded within meaningful collocations or short contextual sentences. In conclusion, word cards provide a practical and flexible method for learners to review, memorize, and expand their vocabulary effectively.

2.2.3. The benefits of using word cards in English teaching and learning

Using word cards can help students gain a variety of benefits. First, word cards can provide a sense of progress and achievement, especially when numerical goals are set and met (Nation, 2022). Word cards are also easily transportable and can be used during downtime in or outside of class to either learn new words or review previously learned ones (Schmitt, 1995). Another important benefit is that word cards can be tailored to the specific requirements of individual students and are, as a result, a source of intrinsic motivation for those students (Nation, 2022). Besides that, word cards are an educational tool that can be used for learning at any level of vocabulary competence (Cameron, 2001). Next, learning with word cards will typically include multiple repetitions of the same information because the word cards themselves do not change from one learning session to the next, which supports long-term vocabulary retention (Nation, 2022). Moreover, word cards are suitable for learners at all levels of vocabulary proficiency, making them a flexible educational tool (Thornbury, 2006). Finally, vocabulary learning becomes more effective when students meet and use words in meaningful contexts through reading, listening, speaking, and writing activities (Nation, 2022). Therefore, the use of word cards not only enhances students' vocabulary retention but also encourages active, independent, and continuous learning.

2.2.4. The drawbacks of using word cards in English teaching and learning

Although word cards have a lot of advantages in vocabulary learning, they have some disadvantages that should be taken into consideration. First, word cards are considered a traditional method to support the communicative approach to language teaching, which emphasizes meaningful interaction and language use in real-life situations (Nation, 2022). Second, it is a mistake to think that memorizing vocabulary using word cards ensures that the words will be retained indefinitely because learners may forget vocabulary if they do not regularly review and use the words in context (Schmitt, 1995). Finally, the use of word cards does not imply that all available information regarding a word has been learned, even though they can be designed to carry a significant quantity of data, such as pronunciation, collocations, and grammatical patterns (Nation, 2022). Consequently, teaching vocabulary with word cards requires patience from the teacher because students need frequent review and repeated exposure to vocabulary; otherwise, they may forget the words they have memorized, especially when they lack learning motivation.

2.3. Theoretical Framework

Nation (2022) argued that the learning of vocabulary becomes more effective when learners are exposed to and revisit words in meaningful contexts over a period. Learners need

multiple opportunities to recall the meanings, pronunciation, and usage of a word, rather than memorizing the vocabulary once, during classroom activities, or in subsequent revision. Repeated exposure to vocabulary may help strengthen memory and transfer lexical knowledge from short-term to more permanent long-term retention. For young learners, this is especially important because children tend to forget newly learned words quickly if they are not practised in different contexts (Cameron, 2001). Vocabulary instruction should provide opportunities for regular review and meaningful communicative use to support long-term vocabulary development.

Word cards can support this retrieval process by allowing learners to practice vocabulary flexibly through games, pair-work, pronunciation activities, and home study. These activities support learners in recalling vocabulary items regularly and strengthen retention through continuous review (Nation, 2022). Similarly, Schmitt and Schmitt (2020) noted that spaced vocabulary practice contributes positively to vocabulary acquisition because learners actively retrieve lexical knowledge during learning activities. In the present study, students used word cards during classroom review tasks, communicative activities, and home practice throughout the intervention period. Word cards should not be viewed as an isolated learning method, but rather as a supportive pedagogical tool that encourages vocabulary review, learner interaction, and communicative language practice. The present study was theoretically grounded in vocabulary retrieval, communicative practice, and learner interaction as key processes supporting vocabulary development among young learners.

2.4. Research Gaps

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that word cards are an effective instructional tool for improving English vocabulary learning. They could enhance vocabulary retention, increase learner motivation, and promote classroom participation across different educational contexts (Nation, 2022; Lei & Reynolds, 2022; Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020; Thornbury, 2006). Moreover, studies involving young learners have reported positive effects of word cards on vocabulary achievement and learner engagement (Agustina et al., 2023; Nova et al., 2024).

Despite these valuable findings, several important gaps remain. First, most previous studies were conducted outside the Vietnamese context or involved different learner populations, such as secondary school students or adult EFL learners. Little classroom action research has investigated the use of student-made word cards among primary school learners in low-resource educational settings in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. Second, little attention has been paid to how young learners experience word-card activities in terms of classroom participation, peer interaction, learner confidence, and personal perceptions (Cameron, 2001; Pinter, 2017). Third, although vocabulary knowledge consists of interconnected dimensions of Form, Meaning, and Use (Nation, 2022), existing studies have rarely investigated how word-card activities contribute to the development of these different aspects of vocabulary knowledge among young EFL learners. Therefore, the present classroom action research was conducted to examine the use of word cards in supporting Grade 4 learners' English vocabulary learning at My Phong Primary School in Dong Thap Province. The study also explored students' perceptions of vocabulary learning through word card activities by combining quantitative and qualitative data to provide a more comprehensive understanding of vocabulary learning in a primary EFL classroom context.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study adopted an action research design (Kemmis et al., 2014) to investigate the use of word cards in supporting Grade 4 learners' English vocabulary learning. A mixed-methods approach was employed because it enabled the researcher to examine both students' vocabulary achievement and their learning experiences, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the intervention (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Integrating both types of data also enhanced the credibility of the findings through methodological triangulation. Quantitative data were collected through a Pre-test, Post-test 1, and Post-test 2 to measure students' vocabulary development in terms of Form, Meaning, and Use. Qualitative data were gathered through classroom observations, using observation checklists and focus group interviews that explored students' perceptions and experiences of learning vocabulary through word-card activities.

3.2. Participants

A total of 30 Grade 4 students (11 girls and 19 boys), aged 9 to 10 years, participated in the study. All of the participants completed the vocabulary tests and took part in the classroom observations across the two action research cycles. After the intervention, 15 students (10 girls and 5 boys) voluntarily participated in the focus group interviews to provide qualitative data on their learning experiences and perceptions of the word-card activities.

3.3. Instruments

3.3.1. Pre-test and post-tests

Pre- and post-tests measured students' vocabulary knowledge before and after the word card intervention, adapted from DOET (2025) and consistent test procedures at each stage. The test was developed by the researcher based on the Family and Friends 4 curriculum (Hoang et al., 2022) and aimed to assess students' vocabulary knowledge in terms of Form, Meaning, and Use following Nation's (2022) framework. In this way, the instrument measured both receptive vocabulary knowledge, such as recognizing meanings and pronunciation, and productive knowledge, including spelling and sentence construction.

The test included 15 scoring items distributed across three vocabulary components: Form, Meaning, and Use. With each correct response, the participants received 0.2 points. The total test score was 3.0 points. Therefore, each vocabulary component contributed equally to the total score. The Form section included spelling and pronunciation tasks, the Meaning section focused on matching words with pictures and identifying meanings, and the Use section required students to arrange words into meaningful sentences. To ensure content validity, all vocabulary items were selected from the Grade 4 textbook and aligned with the learning outcomes of the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET).

Before official administration, the test was reviewed by two experienced EFL teachers to ensure clarity and appropriateness. Then, it was piloted with ten Grade 4 students from another class and two English teachers to check clarity, difficulty level, and instructions. Based on the pilot results, several minor revisions were made to improve the suitability of the test for young learners. Using similar test formats across all testing stages helped ensure consistency in measurement and reduced potential bias caused by different assessment instruments. All tests were conducted individually under the same classroom conditions and scored using the same analytic criteria to ensure reliability and fairness in evaluating students' vocabulary progress throughout the intervention.

3.3.2. Classroom observation

Classroom observation was used to collect qualitative data on students' participation and vocabulary use during word card-based learning activities across the two action research cycles. Sixteen classroom observations were conducted using an observation checklist and field notes. The observation checklist focused on clearly observable behaviours appropriate for Grade 4 learners, including students' participation, vocabulary recall, pronunciation attempts, sentence production, peer interaction, and communicative use of vocabulary during pair and group activities. The checklist was adapted from principles of classroom observation in young learner research and communicative language teaching (Cameron, 2001; Pinter, 2017; O'Leary, 2020). Prior to implementation, it was reviewed by two experienced EFL teachers to improve its clarity, relevance, and suitability for the primary school context.

Each observation criterion was rated using a five-point frequency scale based on the approximate proportion of students demonstrating the target behaviour during classroom activities: 1 = almost never observed (0-10% of students), 2 = rarely observed (11-30%), 3 = sometimes observed (31-50%), 4 = frequently observed (51-80%), and 5 = consistently observed (81- 100%). Field notes were recorded during every observation session to document important classroom events and students' learning behaviours in greater detail, providing contextual evidence to support the checklist ratings. Observation scores were interpreted together with the field notes to strengthen data triangulation and provide a richer understanding of students' engagement and vocabulary use during the intervention (O'Leary, 2020).

3.3.3. Interview

Following the intervention, fifteen students voluntarily participated in the focus group interviews. The students were organized into three groups of five participants to encourage interaction and discussion. Five male and ten female students took part in the interviews. Participation was entirely voluntary, and students were informed that they could decline or withdraw from the interviews at any time without any consequences for their learning or classroom assessment. Three focus group interviews were conducted to explore students' experiences, perceptions, and opinions regarding the use of word cards in English vocabulary learning. The interview questions were developed based on the research framework proposed by the researcher. The interviews focused on the main areas: students' feelings toward learning vocabulary with word cards, their use of word cards during classroom and home study activities, the benefits and difficulties they experienced, and their suggestions for improving word card activities in English lessons. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to help the students express their ideas more naturally and comfortably. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for further thematic analysis. The semi-structured interview questions are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Interview questions

Using word cards

1. How did you feel when making and learning vocabulary with word cards?
 2. Before the teacher checked vocabulary in class, did you use word cards to study English words at home? How did you study with them?
 3. When studying at home, which words or sentence patterns did you practice most with word cards?
 4. How did you use word cards in class? Can you give me one example?
 5. Which activity did you like most when learning with word cards?
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Perceptions of word card use

1. How did word cards help you remember English vocabulary? Can you tell me a word you still remember now?
 2. How did word cards help you become more confident in speaking or pronouncing English words?
 3. Did word cards help you participate more actively in classroom games or activities? Can you give one example?
 4. How did word cards help you make English sentences in class?
 5. Do you face any difficulties when learning vocabulary with word cards? If yes, please share your experience.
-

Suggestions

1. Do you want teachers to continue using word cards in English classes? Why?
 2. In your opinion, what should teachers do to make vocabulary activities more interesting and easier to learn?
-

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

Before the study began, official permission was obtained from the school principal, and written informed consent was collected from students' parents. The intervention lasted eight weeks and covered four instructional units from the Family and Friends 4 textbook (Hoang et al., 2022). English lessons were conducted four times per week, and students learned approximately 12–15 target vocabulary items in each unit, resulting in nearly 60 vocabulary items being taught through word-card activities over the intervention period.

3.4.1. Cycle 1

At the beginning of Cycle 1, a pre-test was administered to 30 fourth-grade students under standardized classroom conditions to examine their initial vocabulary knowledge in terms of Form, Meaning, and Use. During the intervention, students participated in word card-based vocabulary activities integrated into regular English lessons. The word cards were designed using white cardboard paper approximately one-quarter of an A4 sheet in size. Each word card included the target word, phonetic transcription, stress marking, Vietnamese meaning, an optional simple hand-drawn picture created by the students and a sample sentence using the target word on the back. After new vocabulary items were introduced in class through pronunciation and meaning explanation, students created the basic content of the cards during the lesson and later decorated or completed them at home if necessary. The word cards were regularly used in warm-up review activities, production stages during structure lessons and the last lesson of each unit to encourage vocabulary recall and communicative use. Most card-based activities lasted approximately 10 minutes during each lesson. The first cycle mainly focused on helping students become familiar with creating and using word cards for vocabulary learning. At the end of Cycle 1, post-test 1 was administered to evaluate students' progress and identify difficulties that needed improvement in the following cycle.

3.4.2. Cycle 2

After Cycle 1, classroom observations showed that many students still relied heavily on memorization and lacked confidence when using English during classroom activities. To address these issues, several adjustments were made to Cycle 2, including the addition of communicative and guided speaking tasks to encourage more meaningful vocabulary use and interaction. During Cycle 2, word card activities were integrated into pair work, group

discussions, and simple communicative tasks in English lessons. Classroom observations continued throughout the cycle, with greater attention given to students' confidence, participation, and vocabulary use in communication. At the end of the cycle, students completed post-test 2, which was administered under the same testing conditions as the pre-test and Post-test 1. The purpose of Post-test 2 was to examine students' vocabulary development after the revised intervention and to determine whether the instructional modifications introduced in Cycle 2 resulted in further improvement in vocabulary knowledge. Following the test, focus group interviews were conducted to explore students' perceptions and learning experiences related to the use of word cards.

3.5. Data Analysis

Quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed to answer the research questions and examine the use of word cards in vocabulary learning. Quantitative data from the pre-test, Post-test 1, and Post-test 2 were analyzed using descriptive statistics and paired-sample t-tests in SPSS Version 26. Effect size (Cohen's *d*) was also calculated to examine the degree of improvement. Mean scores and standard deviations were used to show students' vocabulary performance across the two action research cycles, while a significance level of $p < .05$ was applied to determine statistical significance.

Qualitative data from classroom observations and interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis. First, the researcher repeatedly read the interview transcripts and observation notes to identify meaningful patterns related to students' vocabulary learning experiences. Initial open codes were then developed based on recurring ideas, classroom behaviors, and students' responses during the intervention. Similar codes were grouped into broader categories and later organized into major themes, including learning experiences, vocabulary learning and use, confidence and communicative participation, and challenges of implementation, which were subsequently used to interpret students' perceptions of word-card activities. The coding categories were continuously reviewed and refined to ensure consistency and alignment with the research objectives. Finally, the quantitative and qualitative findings were compared and triangulated to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the intervention and students' learning experiences.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Research Results

4.1.1. Test results

The quantitative findings provide evidence regarding the effects of word cards on students' vocabulary development across the two action research cycles. The descriptive statistics showed gradual improvement in students' vocabulary performance in three aspects of vocabulary knowledge, including Form, Meaning, and Use. Overall, the mean total score increased from 1.90 in the pre-test to 1.92 in Post-test 1 and 2.05 in Post-test 2, while the standard deviations remained relatively stable across the three testing stages. This indicates that students' vocabulary performance improved progressively over time.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for vocabulary development (N = 30)

Test	Form M (SD)	Meaning M (SD)	Use M (SD)	Total M (SD)
Pre-test	0.65 (0.20)	0.79 (0.18)	0.46 (0.18)	1.90 (0.49)
Post-test 1	0.67 (0.20)	0.76 (0.19)	0.49 (0.21)	1.92 (0.53)
Post-test 2	0.71 (0.18)	0.81 (0.18)	0.53 (0.17)	2.05 (0.47)

During Cycle 1, students' vocabulary performance remained relatively stable. The mean total score increased slightly from 1.90 in the pre-test to 1.92 in Post-test 1, representing a tiny gain of 0.02. At the component level, the Form component increased marginally from 0.65 to 0.67, while the Use component rose from 0.46 to 0.49. In contrast, the Meaning component decreased slightly from 0.79 to 0.76. Among the three aspects, the Use component remained the lowest-scoring component in both tests. In cycle 2, the total Mean score increased 0.13 from 1.92 in Post-test 1 to 2.05 in Post-test 2. All three vocabulary components showed moderate improvement during this stage. Specifically, the mean score for Form increased from 0.67 to 0.71, meaning rose from 0.76 to 0.81, and Use improved from 0.49 to 0.53. Although use continued to be the lowest-scoring aspect, it demonstrated noticeable progress in Post-test 2.

Regarding score variability, the standard deviations across the three testing stages remained relatively stable, changing from 0.49 in the pre-test to 0.53 in Post-test 1 and 0.47 in Post-test 2. Similar minor changes were observed across the three vocabulary components, indicating relatively consistent score distributions among students throughout the intervention. Further inferential statistical analyses were conducted to examine whether these observed changes were statistically significant (Table 3).

Table 3. Paired sample T-test results for vocabulary development

Comparison	t(df)	p-value	Effect size (Cohen's d)
Pre-test vs. Post-test 1	t(29) = -0.49	.625	0.09
Post-test 1 vs. Post-test 2	t(29) = -3.74	.001	0.68
Pre-test vs. Post-test 2	t(29) = -4.83	< .001	0.88

As presented in Table 3, the three paired-samples t-tests revealed different patterns of vocabulary development across the intervention. The comparison between the pre-test and Post-test 1 showed no statistically significant improvement, $t(29) = -0.49$, $p = .625$, with a negligible effect size ($d = 0.09$), indicating that the first intervention cycle alone was insufficient to produce measurable vocabulary gains. In contrast, a statistically significant improvement was observed between Post-test 1 and Post-test 2, $t(29) = -3.74$, $p = .001$, with a moderate-to-large effect size ($d = 0.68$). This result suggests that the instructional modifications introduced in Cycle 2 contributed considerably to students' vocabulary development. The largest improvement was found between the pre-test and Post-test 2, $t(29) = -4.83$, $p < .001$, with a large effect size ($d = 0.88$), demonstrating the cumulative effectiveness of the intervention across the two action research cycles. These findings indicate that the initial implementation of word cards alone did not produce significant vocabulary gains in Cycle 1. Significant improvement emerged only after communicative activities were incorporated in Cycle 2, with the largest gain observed between the pre-test and Post-test 2. This suggests that combining word cards with communicative practice could enhance students' vocabulary development.

4.1.2. Classroom observation results

Classroom observations across the two cycles revealed progressive improvements in students' participation, vocabulary learning, and communicative language use (Table 4).

Table 4. Classroom observation quantitative results

No.	Observation Criteria	Cycle 1		Cycle 2	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Participation					
1	Students focus during word card activities.	4.13	0.64	4.88	0.35
2	Students participate actively in the activities.	4.00	0.76	4.88	0.35
3	Students complete classroom tasks.	4.25	0.46	4.88	0.35
Vocabulary learning					
4	Students remember meanings of target words.	3.38	0.74	4.50	0.53
5	Students pronounce vocabulary clearly.	3.00	0.53	3.88	0.35
6	Students use vocabulary in simple sentences.	2.88	1.13	4.38	0.74
Communicative language use					
7	Students ask and answer simple questions.	2.75	1.04	4.50	0.76
8	Students interact with classmates during speaking activities.	3.88	0.99	4.88	0.35
9	Students use vocabulary during communicative tasks.	2.88	1.13	4.38	0.74

After a cycle, higher mean scores were recorded across all observation criteria, indicating greater engagement and more active use of English during classroom activities. The most noticeable gains were found in communicative language use, particularly in students' ability to ask and answer questions using word cards (M cycle 1 = 2.75; M cycle 2 = 4.50) and use vocabulary during communicative tasks (M cycle 1 = 2.88; M cycle 2 = 4.38). Similarly, significant improvement was observed in vocabulary learning, especially in sentence production, which increased from M = 2.88 to 4.38. These findings suggest that students became increasingly capable of applying vocabulary in meaningful classroom communication rather than relying solely on vocabulary recall.

These quantitative findings were supported by classroom observation notes. During the restaurant role-play activity, for example, several students were able to use vocabulary from their word cards to ask and answer simple questions independently. Compared with earlier lessons, students required less teacher support and demonstrated greater confidence and willingness to communicate in English with their peers. Several challenges were identified during Cycle 1. Some students spent excessive time decorating their word cards, which reduced the time available for language practice. In addition, a few weaker students tended to rely on stronger peers during pair-work activities. To address these issues, the teacher introduced stricter time limits and assigned specific roles within pairs during Cycle 2. These adjustments helped increase participation and ensured that all students were actively involved in classroom activities. The observation results suggest that the use of word cards contributed to improvements in student engagement, vocabulary learning, and communicative language use throughout the intervention.

4.1.3. Interview results

The focus group interviews provided additional insights into students' experiences of using word cards for English vocabulary learning. Based on the thematic analysis, four main themes emerged from the data: participation, vocabulary learning strategies, confidence, and challenges encountered during the intervention.

First, most of the interview participants (12/15) expressed positive attitudes toward word-card activities. They particularly enjoyed competitive games and group-based activities because these activities made vocabulary learning more interesting and interactive. Student 1A described a favourite activity as follows, "Teacher reads the word in Vietnamese, and the members in our group must search for the English word in our word cards, stand up, raise the card, and read it aloud." The interview data suggest that the game-based nature of word-card activities helped maintain students' interest and encouraged active participation during lessons.

Second, nearly of the students (13/15) reported that word cards supported vocabulary review both inside and outside the classroom. Over half of the students (8/15) stated that they could remember a large proportion of the target vocabulary after each lesson, while others (11/15) described using the cards at home with family members. For example, student 2A explained, "My sister shows the Vietnamese side of the word cards, and I read the English word, and vice versa." Student 1D reported practising vocabulary and sentence patterns related to topics such as jobs and school subjects with his mother. These responses indicate that word cards encouraged independent review and provided additional opportunities for vocabulary practice beyond classroom instruction.

Third, many students (12/15) reported feeling more confident when using English because the cards helped them remember vocabulary more easily. Student 2B commented: "I feel more confident because I have more vocabulary now." Students also explained that they could respond more quickly during classroom activities and participate more actively in pair and group work. Student 3A stated: "My friend shows the card with a Vietnamese word, and I create an English sentence using that word. Then we swap the roles." In addition, several students (3/15) reported using English outside the classroom, like helping younger siblings learn English. These findings suggest that word cards supported both classroom participation and more confidently language use.

Although students generally viewed the intervention positively, several challenges were identified. Some students (5/15) mentioned that drawing and decorating the cards required considerable time. As student 3B explained: "Drawing the cards takes time, but I still like using them in class." Other students (4/15) reported occasionally forgetting their cards at home or sharing cards with classmates when necessary. A few students (4/15) also noted that some cards became damaged during the rainy season. Despite these difficulties, students continued to report positive experiences with using word cards for vocabulary learning. The interview findings indicate that students perceived word cards as a useful and enjoyable learning tool. The cards appeared to support vocabulary review, increase confidence in English use, encourage participation in classroom activities, and promote positive learning habits beyond the classroom.

4.2. Discussion

Regarding the first research question, the findings indicated that word cards have contributed to the vocabulary improvement of Grade 4 learners. Although the improvement observed during Cycle 1 was very limited, stronger effects were found in Cycle 2 after communicative vocabulary practice activities were added to the intervention. The quantitative

findings showed statistically significant improvement between Post-test 1 and Post-test 2, while classroom observations revealed higher levels of participation, vocabulary recall, and communicative vocabulary use. In addition, interview data indicated that many students regularly reviewed vocabulary at home with family members, suggesting that word cards extended vocabulary practice beyond classroom instruction. These findings suggest that vocabulary learning became more effective when students were provided with repeated opportunities to review and apply vocabulary in interactive learning contexts. The findings suggest that greater vocabulary gains were observed when word cards were combined with communicative vocabulary practice, particularly during Cycle 2.

The findings of the present study are generally consistent with previous studies on the use of word cards in vocabulary learning. Similar to Agustina et al. (2023) and Nova et al. (2024), the use of word cards in this study improved students' vocabulary performance and increased their participation during English lessons. Previous studies also reported that students became more enthusiastic and actively involved in classroom activities when visual and game-like learning materials were integrated into vocabulary instruction. Unlike previous studies, the present study combined achievement tests, classroom observations, and focus group interviews, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how word cards supported vocabulary learning among primary school learners.

Several factors explain why word cards positively influenced vocabulary learning. *First*, the visual support provided by simple pictures, colours, phonetic symbols, and stress markings have helped students recognize and remember vocabulary more effectively. According to Cameron (2001), young learners tend to learn more successfully when classroom activities are visual, enjoyable, and interactive. *Second*, repeated retrieval through regular review activities vocabulary games likely strengthened students' vocabulary retention over time. *In addition*, the communicative activities implemented in Cycle 2 have provided learners with greater opportunities to use vocabulary meaningfully rather than simply memorize isolated words. This explanation is consistent with Nation's (2022) view that vocabulary learning becomes more effective when learners repeatedly meet and use words in meaningful contexts.

However, among the three aspects of vocabulary knowledge, the "use" component remained the lowest-scoring aspect throughout the intervention. This finding can be explained by Nation's (2022) framework, which distinguishes between receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge. In the present study, the Form and Meaning components mainly involved receptive vocabulary knowledge, such as recognizing pronunciation, spelling, and word meanings. In contrast, the Use component required learners to produce vocabulary accurately in simple sentence construction and communicative activities, which is cognitively more demanding for young learners. Therefore, communicative vocabulary use requires longer exposure, repeated practice, and greater confidence before substantial improvement can be achieved. The findings showed that the use component remained the lowest-performing aspect throughout the intervention, suggesting that productive vocabulary knowledge develops more slowly than receptive vocabulary knowledge. In general, the findings suggest that word cards can serve as a practical and low-cost teaching tool for improving vocabulary learning in primary school classrooms, particularly in low-resource educational settings in the Mekong Delta.

The findings related to the second research question revealed that most students showed positive perceptions toward the use of word cards in vocabulary learning activities. Classroom observations and interview findings indicated that students became more active and willing to participate during English lessons when this instructional tool was integrated into classroom activities. Many students expressed that they enjoyed drawing, colouring, and using cards

during games and pair-work and group activities. Compared with traditional vocabulary memorization activities, students appeared to participate more actively and showed greater interest in reviewing and practicing vocabulary with their classmates.

The positive perceptions observed in this study can be explained by the characteristics of young learners and the interactive nature of word card activities. According to Cameron (2001) and Pinter (2017), young learners tend to respond positively to learning activities that are visual, enjoyable, and socially interactive. In the present study, students not only reviewed vocabulary individually but also practiced pronunciation, exchanged cards, and participated in communicative vocabulary practice. These activities have reduced classroom anxiety and encouraged students to participate more confidently during English lessons. Several quieter students also became more willing to pronounce vocabulary aloud and answer questions during classroom activities, suggesting that the intervention supported learners' confidence and reduced fear of making mistakes.

Another important factor influencing students' positive perceptions was the use of materials. Because students created and decorated the word cards themselves, the learning materials have increased their sense of ownership and personal involvement in vocabulary learning. Several students also reported practicing vocabulary with family members outside the classroom. This finding suggests that word cards not only supported classroom learning but also encouraged independent review and family-assisted learning, which may have increased students' exposure to English vocabulary beyond lesson time. According to Nation (2022), regular review and repeated retrieval are essential for strengthening long-term vocabulary retention.

Despite these positive perceptions, several challenges were also identified during the intervention. The interview and observation findings identified several practical challenges associated with the use of word cards. These included the time required to create and decorate the cards, occasionally forgetting to bring the cards to class, and damage to the cards during the rainy season. The implications of these findings suggest that word cards are a practical and low-cost instructional tool that can support vocabulary learning, classroom participation, and learner confidence when implemented with appropriate teacher guidance (Agustina et al., 2023, Nova et al., 2024, Wilkinson, 2020).

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study reveals that the use of word cards will contribute to gradual improvement in students' vocabulary knowledge in terms of Form, Meaning, and Use, while stronger effects were observed during Cycle 2. In addition, the use of word cards increased students' participation, confidence, and peer interaction during vocabulary learning activities. The visual and interactive nature of the activities also helped create a more enjoyable and less stressful learning atmosphere for young learners. However, several challenges were identified during the intervention, including students forgetting to bring cards to class, spending excessive time decorating cards, and weaker learners depending on peers during communicative tasks. Nevertheless, these difficulties gradually decreased after clearer classroom instructions, repeated practice, and improved classroom routines were implemented throughout Cycle 2.

Despite the positive findings, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study involved only one class of 30 Grade 4 students in a single primary school, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other educational contexts. Second, the intervention period lasted only eleven weeks, and no delayed post-test was conducted to examine long-term vocabulary retention. Third, because the researcher also acted as the classroom teacher,

some degree of observer bias may have occurred during classroom observations and interpretation of qualitative data.

Based on the findings, several pedagogical implications can be suggested for English vocabulary teaching in primary schools. Teachers should provide students with regular opportunities to review and use vocabulary through interactive activities such as pair-work, vocabulary games, and guided speaking tasks. In addition, teachers should encourage students to create and personalize their own word cards because student-made materials can increase learners' interest, sense of ownership, and active participation in classroom learning. Since communicative vocabulary use requires longer exposure and repeated practice, teachers should integrate vocabulary activities into meaningful communicative contexts rather than relying only on memorization activities. Teachers should combine word card activities with communicative tasks, pair-work, pronunciation practice, and repeated vocabulary review to maximize vocabulary learning opportunities for young learners. The findings also suggest that word cards can serve as a practical and low-cost teaching tool for schools with limited access to modern educational technology, particularly in low-resource educational settings in the Mekong Delta.

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