INVESTIGATING INCIDENTAL VOCABULARY LEARNING THROUGH MOBILE LEGENDS ONLINE GAME AMONG TEENAGE EFL LEARNERS

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A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of *Sarjana Pendidikan* in English Education Department

By:

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ENGLISH EDUCATION DEPARTMENT
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2025

LEMBAR PERNYATAAN KEASLIAN SKRIPSI

Yang bertanda tangan dibawah ini:

Nama   : Salwa Shazwina

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Dengan ini menyatakan bahwa skripsi yang berjudul **"INVESTIGATING INCIDENTAL VOCABULARY LEARNING THROUGH MOBILE LEGENDS ONLINE GAME AMONG TEENAGE EFL LEARNERS"** adalah benar-benar hasil karya penulis, kecuali dalam bentuk kutipan yang telah penulis sebutkan sumbernya.

Demikian pernyataan ini saya buat dengan sebenar-benarnya.

Pekalongan, 13 Juni 2025

Yang Menyatakan,

Salwa Shazwina
2521068

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NOTA PEMBIMBING

Kepada

Yth. Dekan FTIK Fakultas Tarbiyah dan Ilmu Keguruan
UIN K.H Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan
c/q. Ketua Program Studi Tadris Bahasa Inggris
di
    PEKALONGAN

Assalamu 'alaikum Wr.Wb.

Setelah diadakan penelitian dan perbaikan seperlunya, maka bersama ini saya kirimkan naskah skripsi saudari :

Nama	:	Salwa Shazwina
NIM	:	2521068
Jurusan	:	FTIK/Tadris Bahasa Inggris
Judul	:	**INVESTIGATING INCIDENTAL VOCABULARY LEARNING THROUGH MOBILE LEGENDS ONLINE GAME AMONG TEENAGE EFL LEARNERS**

Saya menilai bahwa naskah skripsi tersebut sudah dapat diajukan kepada Fakultas Tarbiyah dan Ilmu Keguruan UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan untuk diajukan dalam sidang munaqasah.

Demikian nota pembimbing ini dibuat untuk digunakan sebagaimana mestinya. Atas perhatian bapak/Ibu, saya sampaikan terima kasih.

Wassalamu'alaikum Wr.Wb.

Pekalongan, 13 Juni 2025
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APPROVAL SHEET

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Title	:	**INVESTIGATING INCIDENTAL VOCABULARY LEARNING THROUGH MOBILE LEGENDS ONLINE GAME AMONG TEENAGE EFL LEARNERS**

Has been examined and approved by the panel of examiners on 25th June 2025 as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Sarjana Pendidikan (S.Pd.) in English Education.

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MOTTO

"I like things to happen, and if they don't happen, I like to make them happen."

— Winston Churchill

"Barang siapa yang bersungguh-sungguh, maka ia akan berhasil."
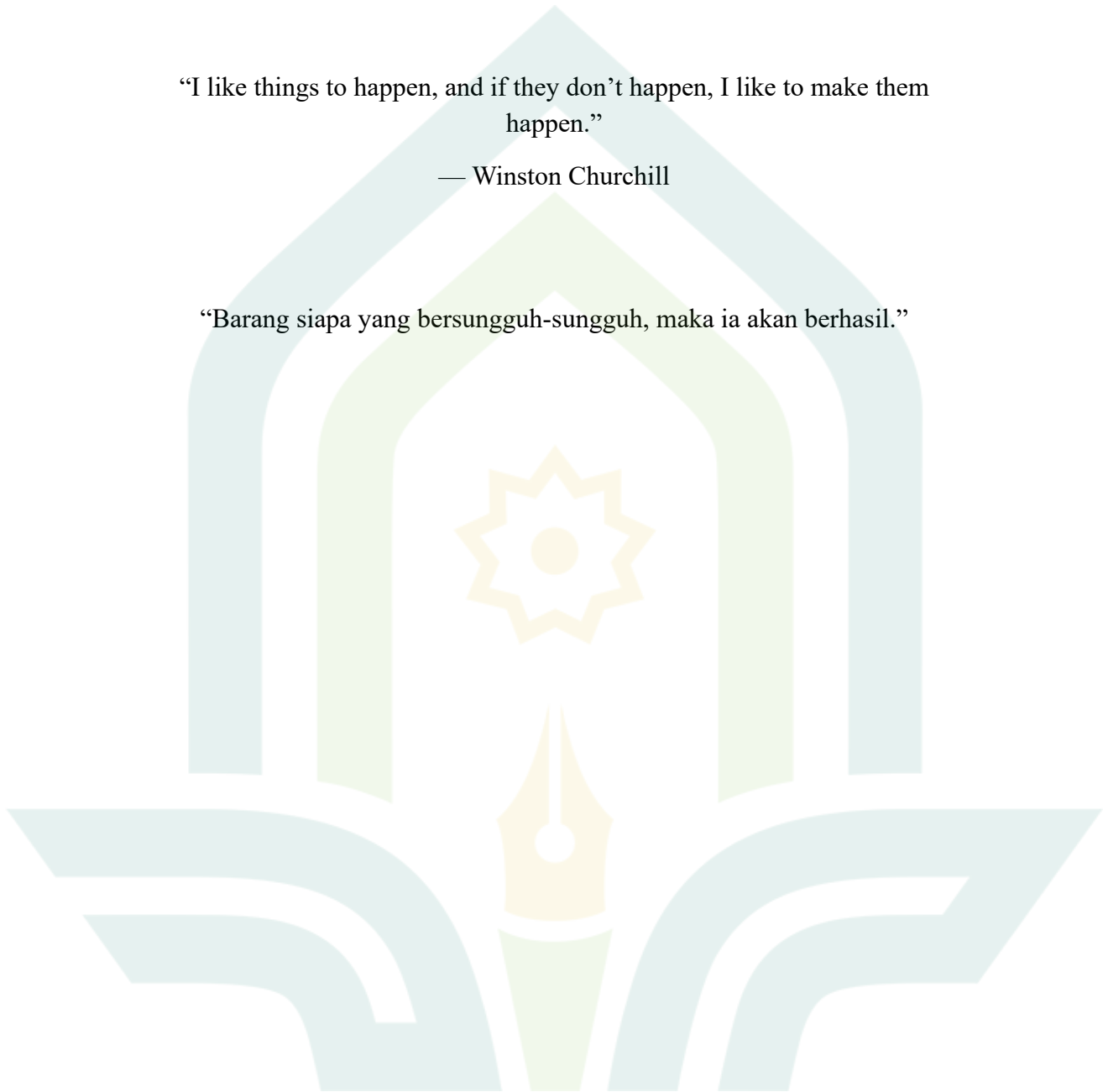
ABSTRACT

This study addresses the gap in understanding how digital games like Mobile Legends facilitate incidental English vocabulary acquisition among teenage EFL learners. Employing a qualitative case study design, data were collected through interviews and reflective journals from three senior high school students in Batang Regency. Findings reveal that Mobile Legends supports vocabulary learning through four cognitive stages: noticing new terms during gameplay, retrieving meanings via contextual cues, generating usage in team communication, and retaining knowledge through repeated exposure. However, learners faced challenges, including limited noticing due to fast-paced gameplay, confusion between similar terms, and low motivation to engage with unfamiliar vocabulary. These findings indicate that while Mobile Legends offers a dynamic platform for authentic vocabulary development, its effectiveness is hindered by attentional and motivational barriers. Integrating guided gameplay activities into EFL instruction can enhance incidental learning outcomes.

Keywords*: Incidental vocabulary learning, Mobile Legends, EFL learners*

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini mengatasi kesenjangan dalam memahami bagaimana permainan digital seperti Mobile Legends memfasilitasi pemerolehan kosa kata bahasa Inggris secara insidental di kalangan pelajar EFL remaja. Menggunakan desain studi kasus kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara dan jurnal reflektif dari tiga siswa SMA di Kabupaten Batang. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa Mobile Legends mendukung pembelajaran kosa kata melalui empat tahap kognitif: memperhatikan istilah baru selama permainan, memahami makna melalui petunjuk konteks, menggunakan kosa kata dalam komunikasi tim, dan mempertahankan pengetahuan melalui paparan berulang. Namun, pelajar menghadapi tantangan, termasuk keterbatasan dalam memperhatikan istilah karena permainan yang cepat, kebingungan antar istilah serupa, dan rendahnya motivasi untuk berinteraksi dengan kosa kata asing. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa meskipun Mobile Legends menawarkan platform dinamis untuk pengembangan kosa kata autentik, efektivitasnya terhambat oleh kendala perhatian dan motivasi. Mengintegrasikan aktivitas permainan terbimbing ke dalam pengajaran EFL dapat meningkatkan hasil pembelajaran insidental.

Kata kunci*: Pembelajaran kosakata insidental, Mobile Legends, pembelajar EFL*

PREFACE

All praise be to Allah SWT for His abundant grace, guidance, and strength, enabling me to complete this thesis titled **"Investigating Incidental Vocabulary Learning Through Mobile Legends Online Game Among Teenage EFL Learners"**. This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Sarjana Pendidikan in the English Education Department, Faculty of Education and Teacher Training, Universitas Islam Negeri K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan.

The completion of this thesis would not have been possible without the support, guidance, and encouragement from various individuals. Therefore, on this occasion, I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to:

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I acknowledge that this thesis is far from perfect. Therefore, constructive criticism and suggestions are highly appreciated for future improvements. I hope this thesis contributes meaningfully to the field of English language education, particularly in understanding vocabulary learning through digital media.

Pekalongan, June 13, 2025

Salwa Shazwina

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

The English language lexicon continually expands and evolves, presenting significant challenges for language learners across various proficiency levels. Nation (2006) revealed that readers require between 8,000 and 9,000 word families to achieve acceptable comprehension of written texts, and 6,000 to 7,000 word families for spoken texts. This implies that learners must be familiar with high-frequency words (approximately 2,000 word families) and mid-frequency words (around 7,000 word families). In contrast, Adolphs and Schmitt (2003) found that basic everyday oral communication necessitates knowledge of 2,000 to 3,000 word families. The cognitive demands of vocabulary acquisition involve multiple dimensions, including form recognition, meaning association, grammatical functions, collocations, and pragmatic usage. According to Nation (2001), vocabulary acquisition is a multifaceted cognitive process involving categorization, association, and semantic network development, posing challenges in foreign language education systems, particularly in contexts with limited exposure to authentic language environments. These challenges underscore the need for effective educational strategies to address the complexities of vocabulary learning (Schmitt, 2000).

EFL learners in Indonesia, especially those aged 15-18 years, face particular difficulties in vocabulary acquisition due to several contextual challenges. Renandya and Widodo (2016) highlight critical barriers in foreign language learning, particularly the limited opportunities for language input. In the Indonesian context, communication is predominantly dominated by the first language, severely constraining exposure to the target language and typically confining English learning to classroom environments (Kusumawardani & Anjaniputra, 2024). This restricted input creates significant challenges for language

acquisition, as learners are deprived of ongoing opportunities to develop their language skills. Some learners attempt to compensate by developing social strategies, such as seeking opportunities to interact with native speakers or engage in additional language exposure activities (Daflizara, Sulistiyo, & Kamil, 2022). Traditional teaching methods in Indonesian schools often emphasize repetitive memorization over contextualized vocabulary learning, resulting in poor retention and limited application skills. This approach conflicts with research demonstrating that decontextualized vocabulary instruction yields lower retention rates compared to contextualized learning (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Kusumawardani and Anjaniputra (2024) further identified significant discrepancies between vocabulary taught in Indonesian English textbooks and the vocabulary required for authentic communication, creating a substantial gap between classroom learning and real-world language needs. Digital games emerge as potential platforms for addressing these vocabulary acquisition challenges through incidental learning mechanisms.

Online games provide immersive, context-rich environments where vocabulary acquisition occurs naturally as players engage with game mechanics and interact with other players (Aulia et al., 2024). This aligns with Ellis's (1994) theory of incidental learning, which emphasizes the importance of encountering language in meaningful contexts. Mobile Legends: Bang Bang, a multiplayer online battle arena game, incorporates English terminology throughout its interface, game mechanics, and communication systems, creating multiple opportunities for vocabulary exposure. Sundqvist and Sylvén (2016) found that extramural English activities, including digital gaming, significantly correlate with vocabulary acquisition among learners. Digital games offer multimodal input, including text, audio, and visual elements, which enhance cognitive processing and retention of new vocabulary (Calvo-Ferrer & Belda-Medina, 2021). These game environments also support Vygotsky's (1978)

social interaction theory, suggesting that language development occurs through meaningful social exchanges in authentic contexts.

This connection between gaming environments and vocabulary development directly impacts learners' overall language competence, with robust vocabulary skills holding profound implications for academic achievement and future professional opportunities. Hu and Nation (2000) show strong correlations between vocabulary size and reading comprehension, listening comprehension, and writing proficiency. The vocabulary acquired through gaming contexts often includes specialized terminology as well as everyday expressions, providing learners with linguistic resources applicable across varied communicative situations. Sykes and Reinhardt (2012) note that the vocabulary developed through gaming often transfers to academic contexts, enhancing students' ability to comprehend instructional materials and demonstrate content mastery. Setiawan (2022) found that over 80% of surveyed polytechnic alumni and company managers stated that English is a key requirement for obtaining a job. The study also reveals that English is commonly used during job applications, either fully or mixed with Indonesian, and that proficiency in the language helps employees secure promotions.

From preliminary observation in the Batang area, the researcher found that many teenage learners, particularly those in senior high school, actively engage in this game and often demonstrate knowledge of English vocabulary obtained from it. Words like "attack," "push," "recall," or "assist" are commonly used and understood by these learners in context. This phenomenon indicates a potential case of incidental vocabulary learning, where learners acquire new words unintentionally while focused on another task, such as gaming.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate how teenage EFL learners acquire English vocabulary through Mobile Legends and identify the challenges they face in this incidental learning

process. By examining the cognitive mechanisms and contextual factors that influence vocabulary acquisition during gameplay, this research addresses a critical gap regarding the intersection of digital entertainment and language education. The findings will contribute valuable insights for educators seeking innovative approaches to vocabulary instruction that align with learners' interests and provide authentic language exposure beyond classroom limitations. By investigating the potential of Mobile Legends as a vocabulary learning platform, this study contributes to the growing body of research on game-based language learning while addressing the practical needs of English language educators in Indonesia.

1.2 Formulation of the Problem

This research provides two research questions:
1. How do teenage EFL learners acquire English vocabulary incidentally through Mobile Legends?
2. What challenges do teenage EFL learners face in incidental vocabulary learning through Mobile Legends?

1.3 Operational Definition

1.	Mobile Legends	: An online multiplayer battle game developed by Moonton (2016), featuring English-based content such as skill descriptions, character lines, and in-game instructions. In this study, the game serves as the primary environment where participants are exposed to incidental English vocabulary.
2.	Incidental Vocabulary Learning	: Unintentional acquisition of new vocabulary while engaged in other primary activities (Hulstijn, 2001). In this study, it

			refs to the process in which participants encountered, processed, and retained English vocabulary through gameplay in Mobile Legends, without deliberate effort to study the words.
3.	Teenage EFL Learners	:	Students aged 15–18 who study English as a foreign language (Brown, 2001). In this study, the term refers to high school students who both learn English in school and actively play Mobile Legends, making them suitable for observing incidental vocabulary learning during gaming.

1.4 Aims of the Study

This research has two aims:
1. To investigate the process of English vocabulary acquisition by teenage EFL learners through Mobile Legends.
2. To explore the challenges faced by teenage EFL learners in incidental vocabulary learning through Mobile Legends.

1.5 Significance of the Study

1.	Theoretical significance	:	This research adds to the body of knowledge on incidental language learning, particularly in the context of gaming and teenage learner language acquisition.

2. Empirical significance : This study will provide data on the vocabulary learning process among teenage EFL learners in informal gaming contexts.

3. Practical significance : The findings of this study can guide educators in integrating digital games like Mobile Legends into English language teaching strategies.

CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

5.1 Summary of Findings

This study reveals that Mobile Legends serves as a dynamic environment for teenage EFL learners to acquire English vocabulary incidentally through immersive gameplay, characterized by four cognitive processes: noticing, retrieval, generation, and retention. Participants engaged with vocabulary by becoming aware of new terms during gameplay, inferring meanings from in-game actions and visual cues, using words in team communication to coordinate strategies, and retaining them through repeated exposure across matches. The game's multimodal input, including text, visuals, and social interactions, facilitated natural acquisition of both game-specific and functional vocabulary without explicit instruction, aligning with the principles of incidental learning.

However, the findings also highlight challenges that limited the effectiveness of vocabulary acquisition. Participants struggled to notice new terms during fast-paced gameplay due to brief text displays and divided attention, often prioritizing game mechanics over linguistic input. Confusion arose when distinguishing terms with similar functions, leading to misunderstandings that impacted gameplay decisions. Additionally, low motivation to actively engage with unfamiliar words, driven by a focus on winning or reluctance to guess meanings, reduced opportunities for processing and retention. These obstacles underscore that while Mobile Legends offers a rich context for incidental learning, its efficiency depends on learners' attention, motivation, and ability to navigate complex terminology.

5.2 Recommendation

The findings demonstrate that Mobile Legends facilitates incidental English vocabulary acquisition among teenage EFL learners through its immersive gameplay, leveraging multimodal input and social interactions, though challenges like limited noticing, term confusion, and low motivation can impede progress.

Educators should consider integrating digital games like Mobile Legends as supplementary tools in vocabulary instruction. Guided activities, such as post-game discussions or reflective tasks focusing on in-game text, can enhance learners' awareness of linguistic input, bridging their gaming interests with language learning goals. These activities can make incidental learning more effective by encouraging students to engage with authentic language contexts within formal curricula.

Learners can maximize vocabulary acquisition by adopting a proactive approach during gameplay, focusing on unfamiliar terms encountered through visuals, text, or team communication rather than solely prioritizing game performance. Strategies like maintaining a vocabulary journal or discussing game terms with peers can transform casual play into a meaningful linguistic experience. Teachers can support this by designing classroom tasks that connect game-based vocabulary to broader language skills, fostering active participation and deeper processing of new words to enhance retention and application.

This study, however, is limited by its small participant pool, focus on a single game, and local context, which may not fully represent diverse EFL learners or gaming environments. Future research should involve larger, more varied samples to improve generalizability and explore different game genres, such as strategy or narrative-driven games, to understand their impact on vocabulary acquisition. Investigating learners across diverse cultural or regional settings, or with varying proficiency levels, and using mixed-method approaches like combining reflections with vocabulary tests, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how digital games support language learning.

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