

**EXPLORING INCIDENTAL VOCABULARY ACQUISITION THROUGH
THE DIGITAL GAME CRIMINAL CASE: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY
AMONG EFL LEARNERS**

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Sarjana
Pendidikan in English Education



By:

DEA MANTASYA

SN. 20522028

**ENGLISH EDUCATION DEPARTMENT
FACULTY OF EDUCATION AND TEACHER TRAINING
STATE ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY
K.H. ABDURRAHMAN WAHID PEKALONGAN**

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2026

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NIM : 20522028
Program studi : Tadris Bahasa Inggris

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Dea Mantasya
20522028

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UIN K.H Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan

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Nama : Dea Mantasya

NIM 20522028

Jurusan : Tadris Bahasa Inggris/TBIG

Judul : Exploring Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition Through the Digital Game Criminal Case: A Narrative Inquiry Among EFL Learners

Dengan ini mohon agar skripsi tersebut segera dimunaqosahkan.

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

Wassalamu'alaikum Wr.Wb.

Pekalongan, 1 Juli 2026

Pembimbing



Eros Meilina Sofa, M. Pd

NIP. 19860509 202321 2 043



The dean of the Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training, UIN
K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan, aproved this thesis by

Name : Dea Mantasya

NIM : 20522028

Title : Exploring Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition Through the Digital Game Criminal Case: A Narrative Inquiry Among EFL Learners

Has been established through an examination held on Tuesday, 8th July, 2026 and accepted in partial fulfillments of requirments for the degree of Sarjana Pendidikan (S.Pd.)

Examiners

Examiner I

Isriani Hardini, S.S., M.A., Ph.D.
NIP. 198105302009012007

Examiner II

Adraf

Nadia Faradhillah, M.A.
NIP. 19930406202012015

Pekalongan, 14th July 2026

Assigned by

The Dean of Faculty of Education and Teacher Training



MOTTO AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

1. Motto

The possibility of all those possibilities being possible is just another possibility that can possibly happen.

Mark Lee

2. Acknowledgement

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ABSTRAK

Dea Mantasya (2026). Exploring Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition Through the Digital Game Criminal Case: A Narrative Inquiry Among EFL Learners. *Skripsi. Program Studi Tadris Bahasa Inggris. FTIK UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan.*

Pembimbing: Eros Meilina Sofa, M.Pd.

Kata Kunci: pemerolehan kosakata secara insidental, pembelajaran berbasis gim digital, Criminal Case, narrative inquiry, pembelajar EFL.

Pemerolehan kosakata memegang peranan penting dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris, khususnya bagi pembelajar Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing (EFL). Selain melalui pembelajaran yang disengaja, kosakata juga dapat diperoleh secara insidental melalui aktivitas yang bermakna, seperti bermain gim digital. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi pemerolehan kosakata secara insidental melalui gim digital Criminal Case pada pembelajar EFL dengan menggunakan desain narrative inquiry. Penelitian ini melibatkan tiga mahasiswa pembelajar EFL yang dipilih melalui teknik purposive sampling berdasarkan pengalaman mereka memainkan Criminal Case. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik yang dikemukakan oleh Clarke and Braun (2017). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa partisipan memperoleh kosakata bahasa Inggris secara insidental ketika mereka berfokus pada penyelesaian tugas-tugas dalam permainan, bukan pada tujuan mempelajari kosakata secara sengaja. Partisipan menemukan kosakata yang belum dikenal melalui instruksi permainan, dialog, aktivitas hidden object, serta laporan investigasi. Mereka memahami makna kata dengan memanfaatkan petunjuk kontekstual dan visual sebelum menggunakan kamus atau alat penerjemah. Paparan berulang terhadap kosakata selama bermain juga membantu memperkuat daya ingat terhadap kosakata tersebut. Selain itu, permainan memberikan lingkungan belajar yang menyenangkan dan bermakna sehingga mendukung pemerolehan kosakata secara alami. Temuan ini menunjukkan bahwa Criminal Case dapat memfasilitasi pemerolehan kosakata secara insidental melalui penyajian bahasa yang kontekstual, pertemuan kosakata yang berulang, serta pengalaman bermain yang menarik. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa gim digital dapat menjadi media alternatif untuk mendukung pembelajaran kosakata bagi pembelajar EFL.

ABSTRACT

Dea Mantasya (2026). Exploring Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition Through the Digital Game Criminal Case: A Narrative Inquiry Among EFL Learners. Undergraduate Thesis. English Education Department. FTIK UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan.

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Keywords: incidental vocabulary acquisition, digital game-based learning, Criminal Case, narrative inquiry, EFL learners.

Vocabulary acquisition plays an important role in English language learning, particularly for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. In addition to intentional learning, vocabulary can also be acquired incidentally through meaningful activities, such as playing digital games. This study aimed to explore incidental vocabulary acquisition through the digital game Criminal Case among EFL learners using a narrative inquiry design. The study involved three EFL learners selected through purposive sampling based on their experience of playing Criminal Case. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis proposed by Clarke and Braun (2017). The findings revealed that the participants acquired English vocabulary incidentally while focusing on completing tasks in the game rather than intentionally learning new words. They encountered unfamiliar vocabulary through game instructions, dialogues, hidden object activities, and investigation reports. They understood the meanings of unfamiliar words by using contextual and visual clues before consulting dictionaries or translation tools. Repeated exposure to vocabulary throughout gameplay also helped strengthen their vocabulary retention. Furthermore, the game provided an enjoyable and meaningful learning environment that supported natural vocabulary acquisition. These findings suggest that Criminal Case facilitates incidental vocabulary acquisition through contextual language exposure, repeated encounters with vocabulary, and engaging gameplay experiences. Therefore, digital games can serve as an alternative medium to support vocabulary learning among EFL learners.

PREFACE

All praise and gratitude are devoted to Allah SWT for His mercy, blessings, and guidance, so that the researcher can complete this thesis entitled **“Exploring Incidental Vocabulary Acquisition Through the Digital Game Criminal Case: A Narrative Inquiry Among EFL Learners”**. This thesis is submitted as a partial fulfilment of the requirements for obtaining a Bachelor’s Degree in English Education. This thesis could not have been completed without the support, guidance, prayers, and encouragement from many parties. Therefore, the researcher would like to express deepest gratitude to:

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The researcher acknowledges all limitations and shortcomings in the content and writing of this thesis. Therefore, constructive criticism and suggestions from all parties are welcome. Hopefully, the results of this research will be beneficial and contribute to the development of future learning.

Pekalongan, 1 July 2026

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Vocabulary is one of the most important aspects of learning English, especially for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. It helps learners understand and use English in both spoken and written communication (Alqahtani, 2015). Having sufficient vocabulary allows learners to understand texts, conversations, and various sources of information more effectively. It also helps them communicate their ideas, opinions, and feelings more clearly. On the other hand, learners with limited vocabulary often experience difficulties in understanding messages and expressing themselves in English (Nation, 2001). As a result, they may face challenges when participating in classroom activities that require language use. Since vocabulary is closely connected to the development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills, it is considered an essential component of language learning (Thornbury, 2002). Therefore, vocabulary acquisition remains an important part of the learning process for EFL learners (Webb & Nation, 2017).

Related to strategies in learning vocabulary, learners often use different strategies that help them understand, remember, and use words effectively. Vocabulary acquisition can occur through both intentional and incidental processes. While some learners acquire vocabulary through deliberate study, others gain new words naturally through exposure to language in meaningful contexts (Nation, 2017). The use of vocabulary learning strategies can make

the learning process more organized because learners have specific ways to deal with unfamiliar words they encounter (Nation, 2001). For example, some learners prefer writing down new words and their meanings, while others learn vocabulary through reading, listening, or interacting with English media. In addition to helping learners memorize words, vocabulary learning strategies can also support a deeper understanding of word meanings and usage in different situations (Schmitt, 2000). Therefore, many researchers have paid attention to the role of vocabulary learning strategies in helping learners improve their vocabulary knowledge (Webb & Nation, 2017).

In recent years, many EFL learners still face difficulties in learning vocabulary. One common problem is that learners easily forget new words, especially when they only memorize them without really understanding the context (Alqahtani, 2022). Because of this, the vocabulary they learn does not last long and is not effective for long-term use. In many classrooms, vocabulary is still taught using word lists and simple exercises without being connected to real-life situations. This makes learners only know the meaning of words, but they often find it difficult to use them in speaking or writing (Muryani et al., 2024). In addition, the learning activities are often repetitive, such as memorizing and doing similar tasks again and again. This can make learners feel bored and less interested in learning vocabulary. In addition, the learning activities are often repetitive, such as memorizing and doing similar tasks again and again. This can make learners feel bored and less interested in

learning vocabulary. Over time, this condition can reduce learners' motivation and make their vocabulary development slower (Yu, 2023).

One approach that can help learners overcome difficulties in vocabulary learning is incidental learning. Incidental learning refers to a type of learning that happens when learners gain new knowledge without intentionally trying to memorize it (Kerka, 2000). In language learning, this means that learners learn new vocabulary while they are doing other activities, such as reading texts, watching videos, listening to conversations, or using digital media. Their main focus is not on learning vocabulary, but on understanding the content or completing the activity. Because of this, vocabulary is learned in a more natural way, since it is obtained from real language use rather than direct memorization. This type of learning is also supported by the idea that learners often acquire vocabulary when their main attention is on meaning rather than on language forms (Nation, 2017).

Incidental learning is considered useful for vocabulary development because learners are exposed to new words repeatedly in meaningful contexts. When learners meet unfamiliar words in different situations, they can gradually understand their meanings and how the words are used. This helps them remember vocabulary better because the words are connected to context, not just memorized as isolated items. In addition, learning through meaningful activities can make the learning process more interesting and less stressful for learners. Previous research also shows positive results of incidental learning in vocabulary acquisition. Webb et al. (2023) found that incidental exposure to

language input can help learners improve their vocabulary knowledge. Similarly, Teng and Uchihara (2024) reported that repeated encounters with new words in context can support vocabulary learning and retention.

One learning medium that can support incidental vocabulary learning is digital games. When learners play digital games, they are often exposed to English through instructions, dialogues, storylines, and in-game interactions without focusing directly on vocabulary learning (Sundqvist & Sylvén, 2016). In this situation, learners usually focus on completing the game and enjoying the experience, while vocabulary learning happens naturally during the process. Digital games also provide repeated exposure to language in meaningful and visual contexts, which can help learners understand and remember new words more easily (Reinders & Wattana, 2015). One example of a digital game that provides this kind of learning environment is Criminal Case. In this game, players encounter English vocabulary through clues, case descriptions, and storylines that they need to understand in order to continue the game.

Based on this explanation, Criminal Case can be considered a potential medium for incidental vocabulary acquisition. This study originated from the researcher's preliminary observation while playing the game. During gameplay, the researcher encountered many unfamiliar English words and gradually understood their meanings through contextual clues, visual elements, and the game's storyline without intentionally trying to memorize vocabulary. Although the primary purpose of playing the game was

entertainment, vocabulary acquisition occurred naturally throughout the gameplay. Similar experiences have also been reported by other players, who acquired new English vocabulary while playing Criminal Case without deliberately studying it. However, research investigating how incidental vocabulary acquisition occurs through digital games such as Criminal Case, particularly among EFL learners, remains limited. Therefore, this study aims to explore incidental vocabulary acquisition through the digital game Criminal Case among EFL learners by employing a narrative inquiry approach to understand how the acquisition process takes place during gameplay.

1.2 Identification of the Problem

In recent years, digital games have become increasingly popular among learners. Besides being used for entertainment, digital games can also provide opportunities for learners to acquire English vocabulary. One of the digital games that has the potential to support this process is Criminal Case. Throughout the game, players are exposed to various English words through clues, instructions, dialogues, hidden-object activities, and storylines. As players focus on solving cases and completing game missions, they may acquire new vocabulary without intentionally trying to learn it. This process is known as incidental vocabulary acquisition. Although previous studies have discussed vocabulary learning through digital games, research specifically exploring incidental vocabulary acquisition through Criminal Case among EFL learners remains limited. Therefore, this study investigates incidental vocabulary acquisition through the digital game Criminal Case among EFL learners using a narrative inquiry approach.

1.3 Limitation of the Problem

This study is limited to exploring incidental vocabulary acquisition through the digital game Criminal Case among EFL learners. It focuses on how vocabulary is acquired incidentally during gameplay, as revealed through participants' narratives. This study does not examine vocabulary achievement, vocabulary mastery, or the effectiveness of the game in improving vocabulary learning.

1.4 Formulation of the Problem

Based on the background of the problem, the researcher identified that the problem is formulated as follows: “How do EFL learners acquire vocabulary incidentally while playing the digital game Criminal Case?”

1.5 Aim of the Study

This study aims to explore how incidental vocabulary acquisition occurs among EFL learners while playing the digital game Criminal Case.

1.6 Significance of the Study

1.6.1 Theoretical Significance: This study applies Kerka's theory of incidental learning to contribute to the understanding of incidental vocabulary acquisition through digital games, particularly Criminal Case, among EFL learners.

1.6.2 Empirical Significance: This study provides empirical evidence on how incidental vocabulary acquisition occurs through the digital game Criminal Case among EFL learners.

1.6.3 Practical Significance: This study provides insights for students, English teachers, and researchers into the potential of digital games, particularly Criminal Case, as a medium for supporting incidental vocabulary acquisition among EFL learners.



CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

5.1 Summary of the Findings

The findings of this study show that EFL learners experienced incidental vocabulary acquisition while playing the digital game Criminal Case. The participants encountered new English vocabulary through various game activities, such as solving cases, completing missions, reading instructions, understanding dialogues, and interacting with investigation-related content. Although learning English vocabulary was not their main purpose of playing the game, vocabulary acquisition occurred naturally while they were focused on completing the game activities.

The findings also show that incidental vocabulary acquisition occurred through several processes. First, participants experienced unintentional learning, where they acquired vocabulary without planning to learn English because their main focus was playing the game. Second, vocabulary learning occurred as a by-product of gameplay, where participants learned new words while solving cases and completing game tasks. Third, participants used context-based learning by using situations, pictures, and visual clues in the game to understand unfamiliar vocabulary. Finally, participants experienced learning through experience and interaction, where repeated exposure to vocabulary helped them remember and recognize new words more easily.

Overall, this study shows that Criminal Case supported incidental vocabulary acquisition among EFL learners. Through gameplay activities, participants had opportunities to encounter, understand, and remember new vocabulary naturally. The findings suggest that digital games can be an alternative way for learners to experience English vocabulary in meaningful contexts.

5.2 Recommendation

This study explored EFL learners' experiences of incidental vocabulary acquisition through the digital game Criminal Case using a narrative inquiry approach. The findings show that learners acquired vocabulary naturally through gameplay activities, contextual understanding, visual clues, and repeated interaction with the game. However, this study involved a limited number of participants and focused on one specific digital game. Therefore, several recommendations are provided for EFL learners, educators, and future researchers.

5.2.1 For EFL Learners

EFL learners are encouraged to use English games as a way to learn vocabulary. While playing, they can see new words in context and try to understand them from the situation in the game. This can help them learn without only memorizing word lists.

5.2.2 For Educators

Teachers can use or recommend digital games as extra learning material. Games can make students more interested in learning

English and help them see vocabulary in real situations. However, games should be used together with normal classroom learning.

5.2.3 For Future Researchers

Future researchers can study other games, more participants, or different learning settings. They can also explore other skills like reading or listening. Using different methods can help give a clearer understanding of how games help language learning.



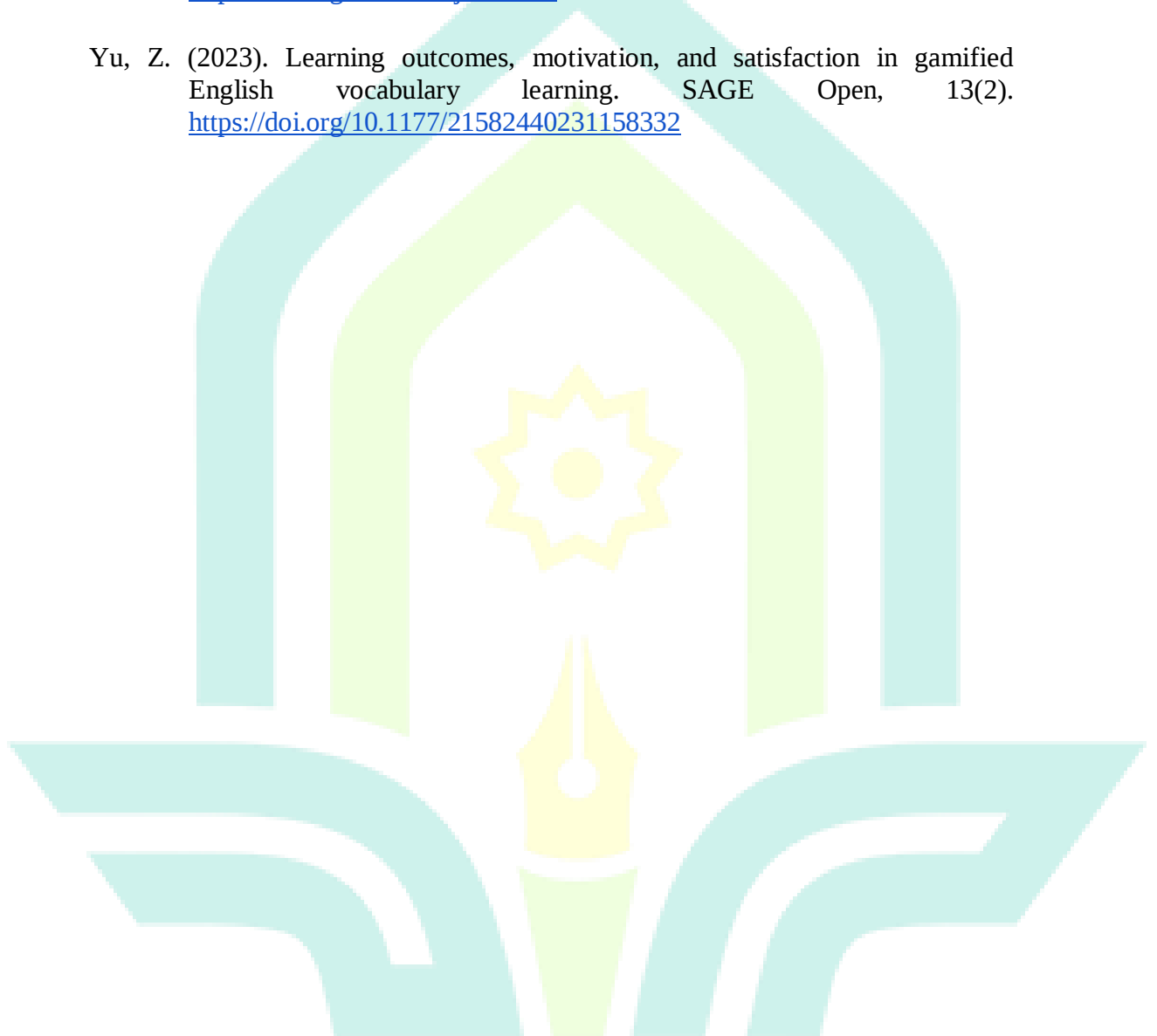
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CURRICULUM VITAE

A. Personal Identity

Name : Dea Mantasya
Place and Date of Birth : Pekalongan, August 02 2004
Religion : Islam
Address : Jl. Pelita V Kertoharjo Gg.8, Kuripan Kertoharjo,
Pekalongan

B. Educational Background

1. PAUD Anggrek Kertoharjo (2008)
2. RA Masyitoh 08 Kertoharjo (2010)
3. MIS Kertoharjo (2016)
4. MTs Ribbatul Muta'allimin (2019)
5. SMA N 4 Pekalongan (2022)
6. UIN K.H. Abdurrahman Wahid Pekalongan (2026)

Pekalongan, July 1 2026

Dea Mantasya





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www.perpustakaan.uingusdur.ac.id email: perpustakaan@uingusdur.ac.id

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Nama : Dea Mantasya
NIM : 20522028
Jurusan/Prodi : Tadris Bahasa Inggris
E-mail address : dea.mantasya@mhs.uingusdur.ac.id
No. Hp : 087748858000

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