# Building Vocabulary in Primary School Students Using Contextual Teaching Learning Model

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***Abstract****. This study explores the effectiveness of the Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) model supported by digital media to improve English vocabulary acquisition among fifth-grade students at SD Negeri Serpong 01. The research followed a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design, carried out in two cycles during the second semester of the 2024/2025 academic year. A total of 25 fifth-grade students took part in the study as the research subjects. The CTL approach was applied through storytelling, role-playing, and problem-solving activities, enhanced by digital tools such as videos and interactive quizzes. To gather insights, the researcher used classroom observations, student work samples, field notes, and interviews. The data were then analyzed using qualitative descriptive methods. The success indicators were set as 75% of students mastering 80% of the target vocabulary. The findings revealed notable gains in vocabulary retention, along with increased student motivation and more active participation in class. The classroom became more inclusive and student-centered, helping learners relate new words to everyday contexts. Although challenges like time constraints and differences in students' digital literacy were encountered, the combination of CTL and digital tools proved effective in supporting vocabulary learning aligned with the Kurikulum Merdeka. This approach also reflects the broader goals of 21st-century education, encouraging critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and digital literacy among young learners.*

## Introduction

Vocabulary expansion is crucial in learning a language, especially with young primary-school learners who are in the stages of developing their cognitive and language abilities. At this stage the child is not only learning to speak and write but he/she is also learning to think, share ideas, feel, react and learn about his/her world through language. A broad vocabulary helps students express themselves, follow directions, and understand what they read and hear in and out of school (Hasanah et al., 2024)(Rahmah et al., 2023). Studies have consistently shown that early vocabulary learning is a strong predictor of later school success. Individuals with a limited lexicon, it is predictable that they would have difficulty comprehending what they read (and ultimately understanding more sophisticated topics) throughout their academic career (Moody et al., 2018). The importance of vocabulary is not

restricted to a facility with language but the very mechanism of accessing more learning. Hence, it is essential for early education to emphasize teaching vocabulary in meaningful, connected and interesting manner.

One approach that has shown a promise recently is Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL). Both Web Ravens and CTL are predicated on the understanding that new information is more likely to be understood by students who can connect it to their lived experience. This concept follows from constructivist learning theories, especially as they pertain to educational philosophers such as Vygotsky, who emphasized the role of cultural and context-based need in education (Sarmiento-Campos et al., 2022). Learning is more effective if ideas are introduced in a learners' Zone of Proximal Development, rather than at or beyond their independent ability level, when the gap between what learners can and cannot do on their own, but can do with help, is covered by educators or peers (Vygotsky). CTL practices that theory to engage students with learning by how to do real things. In relation to learning vocabulary, such an approach would entail having students build stories around new words, role-play situations that are typical of everyday life or solve problems that require the meaningful use of language. These activities promote vocabulary building beyond word lists. Instead, they get students engaged and coming back for more by dropping vocabulary into practical, realistic contexts (Dewi & Primayana, 2019 ; Omolu et al., 2022).

Nonetheless, even though the theory is appealing, the application of CTL in elementary schools is inconsistent. A lot of classrooms still depend significantly on traditional teaching techniques, such as rote memorization, worksheets, and repetitive exercises, especially for vocabulary teaching. These conventional methods might support short-term memory but frequently do not cultivate a deeper comprehension or lasting retention. Additionally, young students possess shorter attention spans and tend to become disengaged quickly if lessons are not interactive or applicable to their existences (Ganesan et al., 2025). This is where digital media is even more important. Today's students are growing up in a world that is driven by technology and the Web, and as such, prefer all things visual, interactive, and multimedia. Educational techniques such as videos, games, and flashcards can vividly present CTL concepts in the classroom. They offer a variety of ways for students to interact with vocabulary, affording opportunity for visual, aural, and kinesthetic learning. Digital media also can support individualised instruction by serving the various learning styles and speeds of learners, thus rendering the vocabulary learning to become more inclusive and effective (Budianto et al., 2024).

Recent research supports the idea that CTL (especially when coupled with the digital) can improve vocabulary outcomes. According for example to students who were taught using CTL-based instruction had higher motivation and became more engaged in learning English (Haerazi et al., 2019). In a similar sense, also showed that the context-based learning strategy boosted the retention of reading vocabulary in young students by associating the word with ordinary everyday life (Çoban Sural & Yaşar Sağlık, 2024). Recent discoveries by promotes active learning and significant communication, particularly when used for collaborative activities (Omolu et al., 2022). However, despite this promising evidence, the vast majority of such studies have generally tested secondary school students or general learning abilities in English. Research outcomes in particular on the impact of CTL on the vocabulary development of younger learners in primary schools remain limited.

What is more, although digital learning tools have pervaded the classrooms, it is rarely seen that they are incorporated in CTL mode-assisted vocabulary learning. Many teachers

are unsure of how to effectively combine these tools with pedagogical models like CTL. As a result, vocabulary teaching in early grades often misses opportunities to be more dynamic, relevant, and student-centered. Understanding how digital media can enhance CTL-based vocabulary instruction could provide new pathways for making language learning more meaningful for young students (Rahmah et al., 2023; Hasanah et al., 2024). Given this context, the current study focuses on how the Contextual Teaching and Learning model**,** when paired with digital tools**,** can improve vocabulary acquisition among primary school students.

The goal is not only to explore whether CTL improves vocabulary mastery but also to examine how digital media can support and enrich this process. Specifically, the study investigates how students interact with contextual vocabulary tasks, how they respond to digital learning tools, and what changes occur in their vocabulary usage, confidence, and engagement. The main research question guiding this study is: *How does the application of the CTL model affect vocabulary acquisition among primary school students, particularly when combined with digital media?* What sets this study apart from previous research is its focus on young learners in the primary school context, combined with a practical application of CTL and digital tools. Unlike broader language learning studies, this research narrows its focus to vocabulary a key building block of language proficiency and explores how context and technology can help children not only learn but also use new words in meaningful ways.

Furthermore, this research is timely and relevant within the framework of Kurikulum Merdeka**,** Indonesia's national curriculum that emphasizes student-centered learning, 21st-century skills, and the integration of technology in education. By aligning with these national priorities, the study provides valuable insights for teachers, policymakers, and curriculum developers seeking effective ways to implement Kurikulum Merdeka in real classrooms. This paper addresses an important area in TFL teaching: the issue of how to go beyond repeating of words and how to provide learners with more meaningful and engaging opportunities for learning vocabulary had already gained increasing saliency in language study for the children. By exploring the synergetic effects on the vocabulary teaching of primary school with CTL and DRL the paper offers some practical and empirically-based approaches to enhancing the vocabulary teaching of elementary learners who need to become proficient and confident users of language in today's globalized world.

# Method

This is a qualitative study that aims at examining in what ways the Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) can help Elementary School students to improve their vocabulary in learning English. The study adopts a descriptive qualitative design which is appropriate in extracting detailed meanings of students' learning experiences and their extent of participation. It occurs in an academic semester in a classroom of fifth-graders in SD Negeri Serpong 01 South Tangerang, Indonesia. A purposive sample of 25 students aged 10-11 years is selected on the basis of their elementary level of English proficiency and endorsement by their teacher. The researcher is the classroom teacher, responsible for conducting all educational procedures and data collection during the study. The programme is spread in 8-six-week phases, integrating activities of learning inspired by CTL. These include storytelling, in which they create and share their own stories using the new vocabulary; role play, which involves simulations of real life such as shopping or going to the doctor; and communicative activities that require the learners to use target language in real life contexts.

Several educational resources such as digital flashcards, animated videos, and visual supports  support learning. Every lesson focuses on specific vocabulary themes which are based on the students' daily lives and  the Kurikulum Merdeka of Grade 5. The researcher gains a comprehensive set of data from different methodologies such as classroom observation, student interviews, and student work. Observations take place during each activity, with structured notes taken to document student engagement, involvement, and vocabulary use. Semi-structured interviews with selected students are conducted post-intervention to gain insights into their views and experiences. Moreover, students' written stories, scripts from role plays, and vocabulary worksheets are gathered to evaluate their application of new vocabulary in significant situations. The gathered data undergo thematic analysis. The researcher identifies recurring themes and categories concerning vocabulary learning, student engagement, and contextual comprehension. To enhance the credibility of the results, triangulation is applied by comparing data from observations, interviews, and student work. Member checking is performed as well, enabling participants to affirm the accuracy of their interview answers. Ethical principles are maintained throughout the study. Informed consent is secured from both the students and their parents or guardians. Participation is optional, and confidentiality is ensured through the use of pseudonyms.

This research aims to offer practical insights into how CTL can improve vocabulary acquisition in a more engaging and meaningful manner for elementary school students. This study adopts the Classroom Action Research (CAR) framework proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart, which is structured into two cycles. Each cycle consists of four stages: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. During the planning phase, the researcher developed detailed lesson plans, prepared learning materials that incorporated CTL principles, and created tools for assessment. The implementation phase focused on carrying out these lessons in the classroom, while the observation stage involved actively monitoring student participation, vocabulary usage, and classroom interactions using observation checklists. Finally, in the reflection phase, the outcomes of the cycle were carefully reviewed, challenges were identified, and adjustments were made to improve the next cycle.

This reflective process was essential to understanding how CTL supported students' vocabulary development and allowed the researcher to refine teaching strategies based on real classroom feedback. In this study, the researcher also served as the classroom teacher, taking on a dual role as both a facilitator of learning and an observer of the research process. This unique position enabled consistent, day to day engagement with students and offered deeper insights into their learning experiences. To remain objective and self aware, the researcher regularly maintained a reflective journal to document personal thoughts, teaching challenges, and emotional responses throughout the study. In addition, informal consultations with fellow teachers were carried out to gain different perspectives and to enhance the trustworthiness of the data interpretation. By grounding the research directly within the everyday classroom environment, the study aimed to produce findings that are practical, relatable, and closely tied to the actual needs and dynamics of primary school learners.

# Result and Discussion

## A. Result

This classroom action research took place during the second semester of the 2024/2025 school year at SD Negeri Serpong 01, focusing on Grade 5. The study lasted

around two months and included eight sessions divided into two cycles. All the inference cycles included four phases (planning, execution, observation and evaluation). A qualitative research was used in this study to enhance students' English vocabulary learning using CTL model supported with digital tools. The class partaking in this study consisted of 25 students (12 boys and 13 girls) and were equipped with mixed levels of English proficiency at the beginning. First impressions and also a pre-test suggested that many students were insecure in their vocabulary and were not confident to use English - especially in their speaking and writing. This condition highlighted the need of a learning approach that is more relevant and contextualised, which became the antithesis for the adoption of the CTL model.

## *Cycle I*

### 1. Planning

In the planning phase, the teacher-researcher designed lesson plans that incorporated CTL strategies, emphasizing words connected to everyday tasks and typical items encountered at home and in the classroom. Different digital resources were used in the lessons, such as engaging flashcards, brief animated clips, and student handouts aimed at helping students relate new vocabulary to their own experiences. Another teacher collaborated to help monitor classroom interactions and document important insights for the reflection stage.

### 2. Action Implemantation

The learning process began with a pre-activity that connected students' real-life experiences to the new material. The teacher played an animated video depicting a child's daily routine, after which students were invited to identify and discuss the vocabulary they recognized. The core activities included sentence-building exercises, role-plays themed "a day at home," and small group storytelling tasks using picture prompts. Students showed considerable enthusiasm, particularly when using flashcards or participating in group games. However, some challenges emerged: a few students were still shy about speaking in English, and others had difficulty constructing sentences independently. To support them, the teacher provided scaffolding through guided questions and model sentences.

### 3. Observation

Observation notes from both the teacher and collaborator revealed that 14 out of 25 students were actively engaged in questioning and answering throughout the activities. However, five students remained passive and required a more personal approach. Most students showed increased interest, especially in visual media and group-based tasks. The vocabulary practice scores at the end of Cycle I showed a class average of 70.8. Fourteen students (56%) met the minimum passing criteria (75). The highest score was 88, and the lowest was 56. Students who actively participated in discussions and presentations generally scored higher.

### 4. Reflection

Reflection discussions highlighted several areas for improvement. Limited class time and students' difficulty in contextual sentence-building were identified as key issues. As a result, several improvements were planned for Cycle II: (1) Simplify instructions during activities, (2) Provide clearer and more concrete example sentences, (3) Diversify digital media (e.g., interactive videos and digital quizzes), dan (4) Strengthen group collaboration to encourage peer support.

### *Cycle II*

1. **Planning:**

Cycle II planning was informed by the evaluation of Cycle I. The vocabulary theme was expanded to include "places around us" and "shopping items." The teacher also introduced digital quiz applications to increase engagement. Activities were refined to focus more on practical use of vocabulary in both oral and written contexts.

2. **Action Implementation.**

The learning began with a vocabulary review through a Kahoot! quiz, which boosted student excitement and helped activate prior knowledge. The teacher facilitated small group discussions and role-play activities based on a "shopping at the market" scenario. Students took turns playing the roles of sellers and buyers using the newly learned vocabulary. This activity was particularly engaging, even prompting previously passive students to participate more confidently. Next, students created mini brochures describing familiar places (e.g., schools, shops), using English vocabulary accurately in short descriptions. These project-based tasks encouraged creativity and contextual use of language.

3. **Observation.**

Observational data showed marked improvement in student participation. Twenty one students were actively engaged, and only two remained relatively quiet but still completed their tasks. Students' ability to construct sentences also improved, as seen in more structured and coherent presentations and worksheet submissions. The class average score rose to 82.4 by the end of Cycle II. Twenty-one students (84%) achieved scores above the minimum competency standard. The highest score was 95, and the lowest was 68, both showing improvement from Cycle I. For example, one student ("A") who initially scored 60 improved to 78 in Cycle II an encouraging sign of consistent progress.

4. **Reflection:**

Reflections by the teacher and collaborator concluded that a structured CTL approach, enhanced with digital media, was effective in creating a more meaningful learning experience. Activities that connected students' personal lives to learning content helped with vocabulary retention. Project-based tasks (e.g., brochures, role-play) stimulated creativity, collaboration, and practical language use in authentic situations

## B. Discussion

### *Enhancing Vocabulary Through Contextual Learning*

This classroom action research revealed how the implementation of the Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) model significantly changed the way students engaged with English vocabulary. Instead of merely memorizing isolated words, students were encouraged to use them within meaningful, real-life contexts. This shift was especially visible during storytelling and daily activity tasks, where students used expressions like "wake up," "brush my teeth," or "go to school" to describe their routines. These findings underscore the importance of context in language acquisition, a concept emphasized in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, particularly with the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Vygotsky posited that learners attain optimal results when they get assistance within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) via social interactions and authentic experiences (Margolis, 2020). When students in our class connected new terms to their

own lives, such acting out situations or talking about what they did each day, the words made more sense and were easier to remember. This corresponds with results from more recent research as well. For example, discovered that CTL enhanced vocabulary retention by presenting the language in circumstances analogous to students' daily experiences (Irwandy et al., 2018).

In the same way, says that kids are more likely to remember vocabulary and feel more secure utilizing it when they are in situations where language is utilized in a meaningful way, as in role-plays or stories (Zhao, 2024). One of the most encouraging things I saw was how much better kids behaved in class and how much more they liked English. During the early stages of Cycle I, many students were passive and hesitant to speak. Some even avoided eye contact when prompted to participate. However, as CTL-based activities were introduced, including group discussions and performance-based learning, their engagement gradually increased. By the time we reached the second cycle, many previously shy students started to speak more confidently, especially during role-play sessions such as the "market day" scenario. Although some still struggled with pronunciation, the fact that they were willing to try and speak in complete English sentences was already a big step forward.

These enhancements indicate that CTL not only facilitates cognitive development but also fosters students' emotional and social growth. say that emotional safety and relevance in learning settings make students more likely to participate and be motivated from inside (de Ruig et al., 2023). This was clear in our classroom, where students could say what they thought without worrying about being criticized. Mistakes were seen as a normal part of learning, which helped create a culture of support instead of judgment. Also, the exercises in context made learning more fun. A lot of children were excited about English class, especially the parts when they worked together to develop stories and could be creative and eloquent. This increase in internal motivation is what (Gan et al., 2023) call "task value." When students see the learning process as fun or important, they are more likely to take part in it.

### The Role of Digital Media in CTL

Digital technologies were very important for helping students acquire new words throughout the study. Videos and animated flashcards helped make abstract terminology more tangible, particularly for those who learn best by seeing and hearing. For instance, a short animated film of a character doing their morning duties helped kids comprehend the term "routine" and what it means in real life. Interactive platforms like Kahoot! also added a layer of engagement through gamification. Although these tools were simple, they created a sense of excitement and healthy competition among students. Many of them became more focused during lessons that involved digital media, and several even requested to play vocabulary games at the end of class. From a pedagogical standpoint, the integration of digital tools aligns with current views on 21st-century learning, where technology is not only a support tool but a central element of student engagement and personalized instruction (Rintayati et al., 2022). When digital tools were combined with CTL principles, they allowed for differentiated learning that accommodated various student needs and learning styles.

One of the strengths of this action research was the reflective process after each cycle. In Cycle I, it became clear that many students were still unclear about basic grammar, such as identifying the function of words as verbs or nouns. In response, the teacher revised the lesson in Cycle II to include focused sentence-building exercises and word categorization

games. This helped students better understand how words functioned within a sentence, leading to clearer and more accurate language use. The collaboration between the teacher and observer also resulted in improved lesson pacing. Initially, time constraints during group tasks made some students feel rushed and stressed. In the second cycle, the same tasks were spread across several sessions, giving students more time to plan, rehearse, and present. This not only improved the quality of their outputs but also boosted their confidence in speaking English in front of the class. These reflective activities are similar to notion of teaching as a never-ending cycle of planning, acting, observing, and thinking (Ruslin et al., 2022). The instructor was able to construct a learning environment that really met the requirements of the students by changing the way they taught depending on feedback.

## *Contextual Application and Real-Life Relevance*

Another key finding was that when words were relevant and related to the real world, they were more easily learned and had more value. They were not just learning words in order to pass a test; they were learning how to talk about daily activities, how to tell stories and how to engage in simple conversations. This pragmatic use of language aligns with the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) that values communication over accuracy (Saifudin et al., 2023). In the current study, we found that students were more motivated to learn if what they were learning was personally relevant. For example, when writing about their morning routines or their shopping experiences, they naturally included vocabulary that they had learned as it at that time was relevant to their day-to-day lives. This is supported by the study students learn vocabulary more efficiently when it is applied to real-world experiences (Akmal et al., 2023). They retain it longer, use it more confidently and grow more receptive to learning English as a living tool of communication and not simply as a studied subject.

Throughout the research, student voice became an increasingly central element. Several students commented that they liked English class more because they could "act," "play," or "talk with friends in English." Some even started using English words outside the classroom, during break times or when working on other group tasks. These small yet meaningful changes indicated that students were beginning to internalize the language, seeing it as something useful rather than foreign. Providing students with a safe environment that allows them to speak, make mistakes, and try again aligns with constructivist principles, where learning is an active and social process. According to learners construct knowledge best when they are involved in activities that allow them to explore, reflect, and express themselves(Alahmadi et al., 2023).

In summary, the application of the Contextual Teaching and Learning model, supported by digital media, not only helped students acquire English vocabulary more effectively but also fostered motivation, participation, and emotional growth. By placing language within meaningful, personal, and interactive contexts, students became more engaged and confident in using English for communication. Their progress, observed qualitatively through classroom interactions, behavior changes, and student reflections, underscores the value of making learning both relevant and learner-centered. As recent literature suggests combining contextual approaches with digital tools creates a dynamic and inclusive classroom environment (Hubbard et al., 2021). This study confirms that when students are given the tools, context, and encouragement to use language actively, they not only learn better they enjoy the process.

# Conclusion

This study shows that the use of CTL (Contextual Teaching and Learning) combined with digital media can improve vocabulary mastery among 5th-grade students. Unlike conventional memorization methods, this approach places vocabulary in real and meaningful contexts, making students more active, confident, and better able to retain new words. Activities such as storytelling, role-playing, and contextual discussions help students connect vocabulary to their personal experiences. Digital media such as videos, interactive games, and flashcards also support various learning styles and help maintain student engagement. The classroom atmosphere becomes more friendly and supportive, encouraging participation without fear of making mistakes. However, this study has limitations, as it was conducted in a single school with a small number of participants, making the results difficult to generalize. Its success also depends greatly on the teacher's ability to create a conducive learning environment and to integrate technology effectively. This research provides a valuable contribution to the development of more contextual and enjoyable vocabulary learning, while supporting 21st-century educational goals by promoting holistic, student-centered learning.

It lays the groundwork for future studies to investigate the effectiveness of such approaches in more diverse educational settings, including larger classrooms, rural contexts, or different grade levels, and to examine their applicability to other language domains such as listening, speaking, or writing. Overall, integrating CTL into digital vocabulary instruction supports the goals of 21st-century education by fostering confident, communicative, and creative learners within a holistic learning environment. Furthermore, the classroom atmosphere became friendlier and more supportive, encouraging students to participate without fear of making mistakes. However, this study has limitations. It was conducted in a single school with a limited number of participants, restricting the generalizability of the findings.

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