# Observing Student's Engagement in Rural Indonesian EFL Classrooms Through The "Word of the Day" Strategy

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**Abstract:** This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of the Word of the Day (WotD) strategy in enhancing vocabulary learning and student engagement in a rural EFL context. A quasi-experimental control class (CC) design was employed, involving two ninth-grade classes from SMP Negeri 2 Samaturu. Class 9A received instruction using the WotD-based approach, while Class 9E was taught using traditional methods. Data were collected through pre- and post-tests, classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and open-ended questionnaires. The WotD strategy was implemented in several stages, including a pre-test, strategy application through contextual texts and games, and a post-test. Quantitative data were analyzed by comparing mean scores between groups, whereas qualitative data were analyzed thematically. The results indicated that vocabulary scores significantly improved in Class 9A (mean gain = 23.3) compared to Class 9E (mean gain = 9.2), along with higher levels of classroom participation. These findings suggest that low-stakes vocabulary strategies such as WotD can effectively promote vocabulary acquisition and active participation in under-resourced rural classrooms. Complementary qualitative findings further highlighted the roles of family support, student motivation, and peer collaboration in enhancing classroom engagement beyond test performance.

## Introduction

Learning vocabulary is still a main challenge of Indonesian EFL classrooms even more so in rural school classrooms where English is limited and teaching methods tend to be rigid, textbook-based, and examination-inclined. English is taught to students from an early age of their studies but many cannot memorize and apply new vocabulary effectively. This challenge is even more critical because vocabulary proficiency is the foundation of all four skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Without proper vocabulary proficiency, students cannot participate even in the simplest communicative function of English (Nation, 2013). This is even more severe in rural school classrooms because students have no support from home and limited access of extra resources.

Earlier work has investigated a range of methods of vocabulary teaching. Online and game-based methods like Bamboozle (Aeni et al., 2024) or applications of MALL (Al Shihri, 2025) have been found to have a favorable impact on motivation and vocabulary development among students. Multimedia techniques, pictorial support, and project work (Kurniawati et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2025) also emphaize how technology can promote engagement. Other techniques such as storytelling (Putri & Ardi, 2020) and word games (Sari & Susanto, 2021) show how creative activity of an interactive order can facilitate retention of

vocabulary. These studies tend to presume well-equipped or city-based situations, good access to computers and higher starting motivation.

While limitations are still present in rural Indonesian school settings, Fadilah et al. (2023) and Saputri & Sukarno (2024) have indicated that designing strategies is difficult when resource scarcity is a problem. Laila (2023) and Megawati et al. (2023) have pointed out that family and community support from the environment heavily influences how English is involved by children from rural environments. Engagement studies (Fredricks et al., 2004; Khaerani et al., 2023; Mafulah & Cahyono, 2023) refer to behavioral and emotional engagement as important, but such is underreported in word-list studies. Generally, a number of texts privilege a spotlight on their test results but most do not look into class behaviors like participation, attention, or peer collaboration, least of all in a rural setting.

This gap shows a required line of inquiry that merges vocabulary instruction with direct observation of students' classroom engagement, especially in less-resourced rural classrooms. Nearly all previous studies counted learning results quantitatively or documented classroom engagement qualitatively but rarely combined the two viewpoints in a singular study. As a result, it is unclear how easy vocabulary strategies are simultaneously able to enhance test scores and dynamically change classroom engagement in Indonesian rural situations.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the impact of the Word of the Day (WotD) strategy on vocabulary acquisition and student engagement in rural EFL classrooms. The novelty of this study lies in (1) its integration of behavioral observation into a quasi-experimental design, (2) its focus on rural Indonesian classrooms with limited resources, and (3) its emphasis on a low-cost, flexible strategy that is both visible in practice and important for rural EFL classrooms. The WotD strategy encourages active recall and routine participation, which are known to foster attentiveness and engagement in learning. By placing WotD in this background, this work provides much-desired evidence into how vocabulary teaching can be made efficient as well as interesting in school contexts where traditional methods tend to prevail.

**Research Method**

This study employed a quasi-experimental design with a control class (CC) to examine the effectiveness of the WotD strategy on vocabulary acquisition and student engagement. The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 2 Samaturu, a rural junior high school in Kolaka, Southeast Sulawesi, as part of the SIM-B (Studi Independen Mandiri Berdampak) teaching program. Two ninth-grade classes were selected: Class 9A (31 students), which received the WotD study strategy, and Class 9E (31 students), which served as the control group. Class 9A was assigned based on the teaching assignment given to the researcher as part of the program, while Class 9E was selected randomly from the remaining ninth-grade classes not assigned to any of the researcher's teaching team. No matching was done based on academic performance or other criteria.

The program was implemented between July 14th and September 4th, 2025. The lessons were conducted twice a week, every Wednesday and Friday. The researcher taught and observed both classes directly during the study. The researcher served as the sole observer throughout the implementation period, taking responsibility for teaching, recording field notes, and conducting all classroom observations.

The application of the WotD strategy followed a cyclical implementation process. At the beginning of the program, a vocabulary pre-test was administered to both classes to

establish baseline knowledge. The pre-test was conducted during the second teaching session, using a paper-based format under direct supervision in the classroom. Students were given a series of tasks including listing classroom nouns and adjectives, translating words between English and Indonesian, and simple recall items tailored to their age-appropriate vocabulary level. The post-test, administered during the second-to-last session, followed a similar structure while including extended tasks such as sentence translation and usage. All tests were monitored closely by the researcher, who walked around the room and issued clear instructions to prevent collaboration or cheating.

In Class 9A, new vocabulary items were introduced weekly through short contextual texts. Students identified unfamiliar words, recorded them, and searched for their meanings independently as homework. On the following Wednesday, their understanding was reviewed through a short quiz. By Friday, the same words were reinforced through interactive activities such as arranging jumbled words, matching meanings, and categorizing classroom objects. This cycle was repeated throughout the study, with students typically identifying up to ten words per text and retaining an average of five to seven words weekly. In contrast, Class 9E continued learning through conventional textbook-based instruction without additional WotD reinforcement. At the end of the program, both classes completed the post-test using the same instrument as the pre-test to measure gains in vocabulary knowledge.

Data collecting used both quantitative and qualitative instruments. The primary data came from the vocabulary pre-test and post-test, each consisting of 30 items in the form of matching, completion, and translation tasks. Supporting data were obtained from classroom observation using a rubric to find indicators of attentiveness, participation, initiative, and peer collaboration, as well as daily digital field notes written after each session. Additional insights were gathered from open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with selected students. These instruments were designed to strengthen the interpretation of test results by providing behavioral and perceptual perspectives.

Quantitative data from the pre- and post-tests were analyzed by comparing mean scores between the treatment and control groups to identify the extent of vocabulary improvement. Qualitative data from observation, questionnaires, and interviews were analyzed thematically to describe patterns of engagement and external factors affecting learning. Triangulation was applied to ensure credibility by cross-checking findings from multiple sources, including vocabulary test scores, behavioral observations, and student interviews. Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the study. Participation was voluntary and consent was obtained before doing the questionnaires and interviews, and all student responses were anonymized.

Overall, this method prioritized the measurement of vocabulary outcomes through a quasi-experimental control class design, and qualitative instruments supported the findings by providing additional insight into student engagement and classroom dynamics.

## Results and Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the behavioral engagement and vocabulary development of ninth-grade EFL students in a rural Indonesian school during the implementation of the WotD strategy. The findings are presented here based on classroom observations, pre-test and post-test results, and student reflections gathered through open-ended questionnaires and interviews.

### 1. Pre-Test and Post-Test Results (Class 9A)

The vocabulary tests conducted before and after the intervention revealed a clear improvement in students' vocabulary acquisition. In Class 9A, where WotD was applied, the majority of students advanced from knowing only basic classroom nouns and a few common adjectives to being able to recognize and use a broader range of vocabulary, including verbs and expressions used commonly in classroom communication. The growth is evident in the comparison of mean scores between the pre-test and post-test results.

**Table 1. Vocabulary Retention Scores Before and After WotD Implementation – Class 9A**

| No. | Score Range | Pro-Test (No. of Students) | Post-Test (No. of Students) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Below 60 | 17 | 3 |
| 2 | 60 – 69 | 8 | 6 |
| 3 | 70 – 79 | 4 | 10 |
| 4 | 80 – 89 | 2 | 8 |
| 5 | 90 – 100 | 0 | 4 |

The average score in the pre-test was 52.1 (out of 100), with most students scoring below 60. In the post-test, the average rose to 75.4, with 71% of students scoring above 70. The most improved areas were adjective recognition and the ability to use nouns and verbs in short, structured phrases. The vocabulary test consisted of 30 items divided into multiple parts: matching, sentence completion, and translation. Students were able to retain an average of 5–7 words weekly throughout the program, even without formal memorization tasks.

**2. Pre-Test and Post-Test Results (Class 9E)**

To better understand the difference in vocabulary development between the experimental and control groups, pre-test and post-test scores were also applied in Class 9E, which did not receive the WotD strategy and continued with conventional textbook-based instruction. The results show a modest improvement in vocabulary scores, but not as significant as Class 9A. The average pre-test score for Class 9E was 49.7, and the post-test increased to 58.9, showing a gain of 9.2 points.

A closer look at the distribution of scores shows that most students remained in the lower scoring categories, with only a small number improving to the 70–79 and 80–89 ranges. No students reached the 90–100 range, and a large portion remained below 70 even after the intervention period.

**Table 2. Vocabulary Test Scores Before and After Conventional Instruction – Class 9E**

| No. | Score Range | Pro-Test (No. of Students) | Post-Test (No. of Students) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Below 60 | 20 | 11 |
| 2 | 60 – 69 | 6 | 9 |
| 3 | 70 – 79 | 3 | 7 |
| 4 | 80 – 89 | 2 | 4 |
| 5 | 90 – 100 | 0 | 0 |

These results indicate that while there was some vocabulary gain in Class 9E, it was less substantial and less evenly distributed compared to Class 9A. Most students remained in the lower scoring ranges, and only 35% of students scored above 70 in the post-test, compared to 71% in the WotD-applied class.

**3. Comparison Between Experimental and Control Classes**

To provide a clearer comparative view, the average pre- and post-test results from both Class 9A and Class 9E were selected and placed side by side. This step serves to visually represent the relative impact of the applied strategy by directly contrasting the outcomes of

the two groups. By isolating and presenting only the average scores, the comparison highlights the overall result of improvement between classes, where one received the strategy applied and one did not. This comparative setup aims to offer a straightforward reference point for understanding the broader effect of the instructional approach.

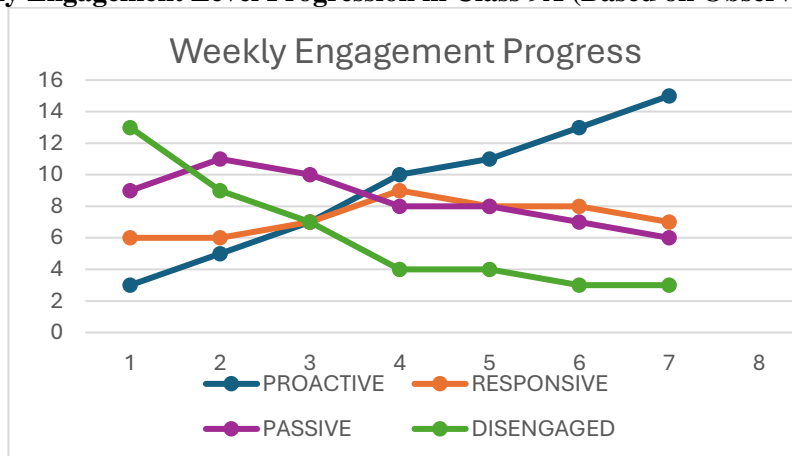**Table 3. Comparison of Vocabulary Test Gains: Class 9A (WotD) vs. Class 8A (Non-WotD)**

| No. | Class | Avg. Pre-Test Score | Avg. Post-Test Score | Improvement | Student Scoring ≥ 70 (Post-Test) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 9A (WotD) | 52.1 | 75.4 | 23.3 | 22/31 (71%) |
| 2 | 9E (Non-WotD) | 49.7 | 58.9 | 9.2 | 11/31 (35%) |

## 4. Behavioral Observation Findings

Beyond written test scores, behavioral data gathered through classroom observation revealed notable patterns. Using an observational rubric focused on attentiveness, participation, initiative, and peer collaboration, the researcher tracked weekly shifts in classroom behavior. The rubric scores were categorized on a 4-point scale: (1) disengaged, (2) passive, (3) responsive, and (4) proactive.

Over the 7-week observation period, students in Class 9A showed increasing movement from "passive" to "responsive" and "proactive" categories, especially during the Friday sessions, where gamified vocabulary activities were held. The number of students demonstrating proactive behavior increased from 3 in Week 1 to 13 in Week 6.

**Figure 1. Weekly Engagement Level Progression in Class 9A (Based on Observational Rubric)**



In contrast, Class 9E exhibited relatively static behavioral engagement. Most students remained in the "passive" and "responsive" categories, with only subtle shifts across the weeks. The sessions were textbook-driven, involved more lecture-style instruction, and lacked the student-centered repetition and interactive reinforcement present in WotD-based classes.

These observations were used to support the primary test findings and offer deeper insight into the changing classroom dynamics under the WotD strategy.

## 5. Student Interview Insights

During interviews, students were categorized into behavioral engagement types based on observational patterns and responses: Confident and Accurate, Confident but Unsure, Quiet but Capable, Disengaged.

Student A, categorized as "quiet but capable," scored 93 on the post-test despite showing minimal verbal participation in class. He consistently submitted complete tasks, showed understanding during quizzes, and expressed deep personal motivation during the interview. Student B, categorized as "confident but unsure," was highly vocal but made frequent vocabulary errors. However, her engagement helped to set a welcoming tone in class and encouraged peer participation. Her post-test score improved from 43 to 69. Student C, a "confident and accurate" learner, maintained consistent participation and scored well on both tests, improving from 67 to 88. Her engagement was sustained by internal motivation despite lack of family support. Student D, categorized as "disengaged," remained inactive throughout the program, with low participation and a slight test score increase (45 to 52). His interview revealed a lack of perceived relevance of English in his future.

These interviews served as supportive qualitative data, reinforcing the test and observation findings.

## 6. Behavioral Category and Test Correlation

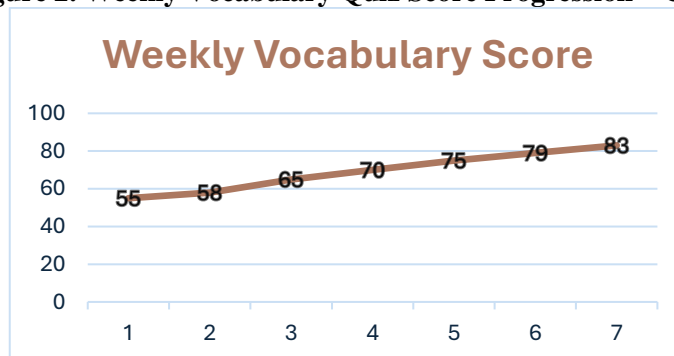**Table 4. Behavioral Categories and Average Test Gains by Student Type – Class 9A**

| No. | Behavioral Category | Avg. Pre-Test Score | Avg. Post-Test Score | Avg. Gain |
|-----|---------------------|---------------------|----------------------|-----------|
| 1 | Confident and Accurate | 67 | 88 | 21 |
| 2 | Confident but Unsure | 43 | 69 | 26 |
| 3 | Quiet but Capable | 56 | 93 | 37 |
| 4 | Disenganged | 45 | 52 | 7 |

This table summarizes how each behavioral type correlated with vocabulary growth. It demonstrates that while confident students improved, quiet students with consistent task completion actually showed the highest average gains in the vocabulary test.

## 7. Weekly Quiz Progression

A review of quiz scores across the WotD cycles further supports the positive result. Every Wednesday, a mini-quiz was administered to review the previous week's vocabulary. These quiz scores were recorded digitally and showed a steady rise in Class 9A's average performance, particularly after Week 3, when students began to anticipate the pattern of retrieval and reinforcement.

**Figure 2. Weekly Vocabulary Quiz Score Progression – Class 9A**



Overall, the results support the effectiveness of the WotD strategy in improving vocabulary knowledge and student behavioral engagement. Students benefited from the cyclical, contextual nature of the strategy, which allowed them to revisit vocabulary across various modes (reading, writing, speaking) without pressure. The findings also reveal that student engagement is multi-dimensional and not always visible through verbal participation.

Observation, as a method, allowed these dimensions to surface clearly, and adding richness to the quantitative gains recorded.

## Discussion

The results of this study confirm that the WotD strategy can significantly impact both vocabulary acquisition and student engagement in under-resourced rural EFL classrooms. However, the meaning of these results extends far beyond raw score increases. A closer examination of student behaviors, learning atmosphere, and interview reflections offers additional pedagogical insights that support and enrich the primary quantitative findings from pre- and post-tests.

### 1. Behavioral Engagement in EFL Classrooms

The growth observed in vocabulary retention among students in Class 9A was not merely a result of exposure to new words, but of consistent and context-rich reinforcement through the WotD strategy. The WotD cycle, which introduces vocabulary through short texts, self-research, and review games, allowed students to revisit and apply new words in ways that aligned with their cognitive and emotional readiness. This aligns with Nation's (2013) assertion that repeated exposure across different formats enhances retention.

In this study, students in Class 9A showed a mean vocabulary gain of 23.3 points, compared to only 9.2 points in Class 9E. While these results indicate a substantial improvement, the study did not include formal statistical testing (e.g., t-tests), and results were interpreted descriptively. As such, the observed gain is presented as classroom-based evidence rather than generalizable statistical proof. Still, the consistency of score gains with observed engagement patterns adds meaningful support to the findings.

Yet, vocabulary mastery alone cannot fully capture the range of student learning. The observational data, while supporting the test results, also revealed how students who were once passive gradually became responsive or even proactive. As Creswell (2014) notes, qualitative shifts in student behavior can provide deeper insight into the learning process. The increase in proactive behavior, particularly during WotD's interactive review sessions, suggests that enjoyment, low pressure, and contextual relevance played important roles in sustaining learning. Student interviews provided additional support for this. For example, a male student who had rarely spoken in class shared:

*"Yes, my family and I recognized English as very important, actually. It's the international language, right? My family told me to focus on it, even provides me books and other learning medias, because they expect me to be fluent."*
(Student A - quiet male student)

This statement, from a student previously classified as "quiet but capable," demonstrates how silent learners can carry strong internal motivation. His behavioral type; quiet, consistent, observant, was reflected in one of the highest post-test gains, highlighting that student engagement does not always present itself through verbal participation but can still align with strong academic growth. By contrast, another student, categorized as "confident but unsure," described her participation with characteristic boldness:

*"For me, miss, it's the accuracy. Answer first, correct or not? We'll see."*
(Student B - loud but inaccurate female student)

While her accuracy was inconsistent, her enthusiasm energized the classroom and encouraged her peers to participate. Her attitude supports the idea that confidence, even when not matched with accuracy, can promote a participatory learning environment. This

observation further reinforces how the WotD strategy helped lower affective barriers and encouraged students to speak up without fear of judgment.

## 2. Sociocultural and Environmental Influences on Learning

The qualitative findings also helped contextualize the test results by showing how environmental and emotional factors shaped student engagement. One academically active student voiced her frustration over external limitations:

*"Yes, I like English very much, but I hope my family shows more support. I really want to attend extra English courses."*

(Student C - academically active but undersupported female student)

Despite being one of the top scorers in the post-test, this student's comments point to how home environment and external support can influence motivation. Her situation echoes the emotional dimension of engagement described by Fredricks et al. (2004), where belonging, encouragement, and value alignment are essential. On the other hand, a disengaged male student expressed a lack of motivation tied to perceived irrelevance:

*"English is good, yes, but important? Maybe only when you plan to go to other countries. When you have no dreams in leaving Indonesia, like me, then no."*
(Student D - disengaged male student)

His statement reflects a value-expectancy gap (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002), in which learning effort depends on perceived usefulness. Although his scores showed slight improvement, his consistent disengagement suggests that even an effective strategy like WotD may not yield meaningful results unless students see a purpose behind the learning.

## 3. The Role of Instructional Design and Teacher Presence

While the WotD strategy was effective in its design, its impact was also amplified by how it was delivered. The teacher's presence; playful, flexible, and emotionally safe, helped foster an inviting atmosphere. Students responded not only to the vocabulary content, but to how it was presented. This aligns with Suciati (2019), who noted that engagement, especially among female students, improves when instruction is personalized and supportive.

Although the teacher's style reflected personal teaching tendencies, it was also intentionally maintained throughout the study to ensure the reliability of engagement observations and to foster genuine participation in interviews and questionnaires. Establishing a safe and open classroom culture helped students feel confident in expressing themselves, which in turn enriched the quality of both behavioral and perceptual data. These findings can be linked to theories of teacher immediacy and affective support (e.g., Dörnyei, 2005), which emphasize the role of emotional climate in facilitating active engagement.

Still, it remains a consideration whether the WotD strategy would yield similar engagement outcomes if implemented by teachers with different instructional approaches. While the structure of the strategy itself provides consistency through repetition and routine, its emotional impact may vary depending on how it is facilitated. Future implementations would benefit from exploring this variable further.

## 4. Limitations and Reflection on Methodology

One limitation of the study lies in the overlap between the researcher's role as both instructor and observer. This dual role may introduce subjectivity. However, this limitation was addressed through triangulation which included cross-checking test scores, classroom observations, and interview responses, and by consistently documenting reflections after each session.

Additionally, the qualitative data served to support the primary quantitative results rather than replace them. This reflects the growing importance of mixed-methods approaches

in EFL research, especially in rural schools where behavioral insights may otherwise be overlooked. The use of structured observation allowed the researcher to find engagement patterns that would not appear in test scores alone, such as silent concentration, peer collaboration, and emotional hesitation.

In this quasi-experimental context, behavioral observation complemented the test-based evaluation, providing a richer understanding of how WotD functioned as both a vocabulary strategy and an engagement tool.

## Conclusion

The findings showed that WotD had a clear and measurable effect on vocabulary development. Students in the WotD-applied classroom demonstrated higher gains in post-test scores, with the average increasing by over 23 points compared to just 9 points in the control group. This quantitative improvement affirms the effectiveness of the WotD strategy in helping students retain and apply vocabulary relevant to their daily classroom communication.

In addition to test performance, supporting qualitative data from observation and interviews revealed increased classroom participation, proactive behavior, and student enthusiasm during the WotD cycle, particularly in low-pressure and interactive sessions. While these findings serve to contextualize and enrich the test results, they also indicate that engagement is multi-dimensional and shaped by emotional, social, and instructional factors.

Nevertheless, this study is not without limitations. The implementation was short-term, spanning only several weeks and involving a small sample size from a single school. Additionally, the absence of a randomized control group means that improvements cannot be attributed solely to WotD without acknowledging the influence of teacher presence, relational dynamics, and classroom atmosphere. These factors should be considered when interpreting the results and generalizing them to broader contexts.

## Recommendation

Building on these findings, several recommendations can be made for both research and classroom practice. First, future studies should consider longer-term implementations of WotD or similar vocabulary strategies to track retention and engagement across extended periods. Combining observational tools with quantitative vocabulary assessments can also offer a more holistic view of learning outcomes. More balanced control group designs would further strengthen validity and help isolate the effects of strategy versus delivery.

Practically, teachers' interest in using WotD may benefit from setting weekly vocabulary targets, maintaining simple tracking logs, and incorporating predictable review cycles. However, these structures should not compromise the flexible and emotionally safe nature that contributed to the strategy's success.

## Acknowledgment

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