Students' Difficulties in Mastering English Vocabulary at SMP Negeri 3 Palopo

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Abstrak

This study aims to identify the types of difficulties experienced by students in learning English vocabulary at SMP Negeri 3 Palopo. A qualitative descriptive approach was employed, involving 10 eighth-grade students with low English proficiency and one English teacher as a supporting informant. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations, then analyzed thematically based on Thornbury's (2004) and Gairns & Redman's (2002) frameworks on vocabulary acquisition. The findings reveal five main categories of difficulty: (1) pronunciation, particularly with words whose sounds do not match their spelling; (2) spelling, due to inconsistencies between written form and pronunciation; (3) word length and complexity, which hinder memorization; (4) grammar-related issues, especially in selecting appropriate word forms (e.g., -ing, -s, or irregular verbs); and (5) meaning, including challenges in choosing correct synonyms and understanding connotations. Contributing factors include strong dominance of the mother tongue, limited exposure to English outside the classroom, lack of practice at home, shyness in speaking, and insufficient access to dictionaries or digital learning resources. The study underscores the need for contextual, interactive, and multisensory vocabulary teaching strategies tailored to the linguistic and socio-cultural background of rural learners.

Keywords: *vocabulary learning difficulties, English vocabulary, pronunciation, spelling, word meaning, junior high school students*

INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized world, English has become a crucial international language. It enables individuals to communicate and interact across countries and cultures. For students in Indonesia, mastering English offers significant academic and practical benefits. English is taught as a foreign language from kindergarten through university, with instruction centered on the four core language skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. To become proficient in English, learners must develop competence in all these areas.

Among these skills, vocabulary plays a fundamental role. A strong vocabulary is essential not only for effective communication but also for success in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Vocabulary encompasses more than just individual words it includes meaningful word groups and expressions that learners must understand and use appropriately. As Napa (2016, p. 6) emphasizes, vocabulary is a core component of any language; without words, language itself cannot exist. Without adequate vocabulary, individuals struggle to express their thoughts or emotions effectively, whether orally or in writing. This idea is reinforced by Wilkins (as cited in Thornbury, 2004, p. 13), who famously stated, "Without grammar very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed." In other words, even perfect grammatical knowledge is insufficient if one lacks the necessary words to communicate meaning. Ur (1996, p. 60) further supports this by noting that vocabulary is among the most critical elements in foreign language learning, as meaningful expression is impossible without a sufficient range of words.

Moreover, English vocabulary presents unique challenges for Indonesian learners due to differences in form, pronunciation, spelling, meaning, and usage compared to their native language. Often, the way a word is pronounced differs significantly from how it is spelled a source of frequent confusion.

Brown (2016, p. 8) defines vocabulary as the collection of words including their origins, variations, and relationships that people use to convey meaning within a language. Indeed, vocabulary permeates every aspect of language use and directly influences learning outcomes. It empowers learners to articulate ideas, comprehend information, and engage meaningfully with content. Without a solid vocabulary base, students cannot fully understand what they read or hear, which hinders overall language development. Thus, expanding one's lexical repertoire is vital for achieving linguistic competence.

Consequently, many students particularly those in rural areas face considerable difficulties in acquiring English vocabulary. One major contributing factor is the strong influence of their mother tongue, which often dominates their daily communication and limits exposure to authentic English usage. This linguistic dominance makes it harder for them to internalize and apply English vocabulary accurately and confidently.

METHOD

Research Design

In this research the researcher was used descriptive qualitative method. This research is conducted to give this method. Was used to know the students' difficulties in learning vocabulary at the secondgrade students of SMP Negeri 3 Palopo

Procedure of collecting data

First of all, the researcher would enter in the classroom. The researcher told, the students what the researcher. After that, the researcher asked the students to come forward one by one to do to the interview. When the researcher interviewed the students', the researcher recorded students' answer. It was aimed to make the researcher easier to make an interview transcript from each student.

Technique of analyzing data

In analyzing the data, the researcher used a few steps, as follow:
1. Categorizing data

Categorizing data used to separate each answer from respondents. The researcher chose and put the data from the interview on objective of the research. Categorizing data is also used to summarize and choose the important information from the respondents. By categorizing the data, the researcher classified the important information that entered in finding research.
2. Data display

After categorizing the data, the next step is data display data. Data display is used to present the data. The presentation of the data was done in narrative to explain data. Data display helped researcher to understand what is happening based on information from respondents.
3. Taking conclusion

The last step was taking conclusion. Taking conclusion used to conclude the data after categorizing and data display done. Taking conclusion has purpose to get fixed data.

RESULT

Following the analysis of the collected data, the researcher presents a discussion that connects the findings with relevant theoretical frameworks outlined in Chapter II. This section aims to identify and examine the specific difficulties faced by students at SMP Negeri 3 Palopo in learning English vocabulary. The study involved interviews with one English teacher and ten students from the school.

The findings from both teacher and student interviews consistently indicate that students struggle due to limited vocabulary knowledge, insufficient practice outside the classroom, reluctance to speak for fear of mispronunciation, and a general lack of consistent vocabulary practice. These observations align closely with the challenges identified during classroom observation.

The teacher's responses corroborate these issues and reflect the realities observed in the learning environment. As Thornbury (2004, p. 27) emphasizes, effective teaching begins with accurately diagnosing learners' difficulties. In this case, the primary challenges correspond to four key areas: pronunciation, spelling, word length and complexity, and grammatical usage all of which were evident in the students' performance.

Furthermore, the results from student interviews support the perspectives of Gairns and Redman (2002) and Ur (as cited in Manic & Christiani, 2016), who highlight that vocabulary acquisition involves more than memorization it requires understanding form, meaning, and use. Indeed, nearly all students demonstrated errors in spelling and struggled with accurate pronunciation during testing.

Vocabulary plays a fundamental role in language learning, particularly for students acquiring English as a foreign or second language. Tozcu and Coady (2004,

p. 473) stress that vocabulary knowledge is crucial not only for language proficiency but also for academic success and reading comprehension, as it directly links symbolic forms with meaning. Regular exposure and meaningful repetition are essential for deep lexical acquisition.

Scholars such as Good (1959), Haywordin (in Ariani, 2009), and Gove (1996) define vocabulary as the collection of words used by individuals or groups within a given language system words that enable communication even when not actively produced by the learner. Collectively, these definitions suggest that vocabulary is a core component of language competence, encompassing form (pronunciation and spelling), meaning, and appropriate usage.

Goodman and Mohr (1991, p. 12) further assert that vocabulary is foundational to reading comprehension; without sufficient word knowledge, understanding texts becomes significantly impaired. Similarly, Harmer (in Anwar, 2013, p. 11) notes that expressing nuanced thoughts such as emotions requires access to a rich and precise lexical repertoire. Thus, a strong command of vocabulary enables learners to communicate ideas clearly and effectively.

Moreover, as Grauberg (1997, p. 22) explains (citing Meara), lexical development is a gradual process. Learners do not acquire words instantly; rather, they internalize them slowly over time through repeated, meaningful exposure. Mastery typically progresses from recognizing pronunciation and spelling, to grasping meaning, then to using words correctly in grammatical and syntactic contexts, and finally to achieving full semantic and pragmatic competence.

In light of these insights, the researcher concludes that the main obstacles faced by students at SMP Negeri 3 Palopo stem from an inadequate vocabulary base and limited practice opportunities. These factors hinder their ability to retain and apply new words effectively. To address these challenges, instructional strategies should focus on expanding students' lexical knowledge while fostering deeper understanding of word meanings, usage, and context thereby supporting long-term retention and confident language use.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 3 Palopo face significant challenges in acquiring English vocabulary. These difficulties span phonological (pronunciation), orthographic (spelling), morphological (word forms), semantic (meaning and connotation), and affective domains (anxiety and low confidence). Key contributing factors include the overwhelming influence of the first language, minimal exposure to English in daily life, limited home practice, and inadequate learning resources. To address these issues, teachers are encouraged to implement engaging, context-based vocabulary instruction such as using visual aids, word games, collaborative tasks, and real-life contexts that accommodates students' linguistic backgrounds and fosters active participation. Such approaches can enhance vocabulary retention and build students' communicative confidence in English.

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