A Study on Students' Difficulties in Learning Vocabulary at Grade VIII of MTs Negeri in Padangsidimpuan

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Abstract. This study investigated the difficulties faced by eighth-grade students at MTsN Padangsidimpuan in learning English vocabulary. The research revealed that students encountered various challenges, including Pronunciation, Meaning, Spelling, Memorization, Differentiation and Sentence integration. Additionally, the study identified several factors contributing to these difficulties: Lack of engagement and Limited exposure. To address these issues, the research explored pedagogical strategies used by teachers to help students overcome their difficulties. These strategies included Vocabulary tasks, Memorization techniques, Differentiated learning, Active practice, Engaging methods, Dictionary skills. This research highlights the importance of understanding student difficulties in vocabulary learning and implementing effective pedagogical approaches to overcome them. The identified challenges, contributing factors, and teacher strategies provide valuable insights for improving English vocabulary instruction in the context of MTsN Padangsidimpuan and beyond.

Keywords. *Students' Difficulties; Learning Vocabulary, teacher strategies*

Abstrak. Penelitian ini menyelidiki kesulitan yang dihadapi oleh siswa kelas delapan di MTsN Padangsidimpuan dalam mempelajari kosakata bahasa Inggris. Penelitian ini mengungkapkan bahwa siswa menghadapi berbagai tantangan, termasuk Pengucapan, Makna, Ejaan, Hafalan, Diferensiasi dan integrasi kalimat. Selain itu, penelitian ini mengidentifikasi beberapa faktor yang berkontribusi terhadap kesulitan-kesulitan ini: Kurangnya keterlibatan dan Keterpaparan yang terbatas. Untuk mengatasi masalah ini, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi strategi pedagogis yang digunakan oleh para guru untuk membantu siswa mengatasi kesulitan mereka. Strategi ini termasuk Tugas kosakata, Teknik menghafal, Pembelajaran yang berbeda, Latihan aktif, Metode yang menarik, Keterampilan kamus. Penelitian ini menyoroti pentingnya memahami kesulitan siswa dalam pembelajaran kosakata dan menerapkan pendekatan pedagogis yang efektif untuk mengatasinya. Tantangan yang teridentifikasi, faktor-faktor yang berkontribusi, dan strategi guru memberikan wawasan yang berharga untuk meningkatkan pengajaran kosakata bahasa Inggris dalam konteks MTsN Padangsidimpuan dan sekitarnya.

Kata Kunci. *Kesulitan siswa; memelajari kosakata, strategi guru*

Introduction

Vocabulary acquisition is a cornerstone of successful foreign language learning (Mehrabian & Salehi, 2019). This paper argues that robust vocabulary mastery underpins proficiency in all four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. *Firstly*, a strong vocabulary facilitates comprehension in listening tasks. Information and knowledge conveyed through various mediums like radio, native speaker conversations, and television remain inaccessible without adequate vocabulary. Students with limited

vocabulary may struggle to process the content of these sources. *Secondly*, vocabulary mastery directly improves speaking ability. A rich vocabulary empowers students to express themselves effectively and engage in meaningful conversations with others, including native speakers (Spencer et al., 2012). Conversely, limited vocabulary restricts communication and hinders the development of speaking competence. *Thirdly*, reading comprehension flourishes with robust vocabulary. Students with a broader vocabulary find it easier to grasp the meaning of texts, extract key information, and understand the author's main ideas. In contrast, limited vocabulary impedes comprehension and inhibits students from fully engaging with written material. *Finally*, vocabulary lays the foundation for productive writing. Written texts are an expression of the author's thoughts and ideas, and understanding these requires a good grasp of vocabulary. Students with a wider vocabulary repertoire find it easier to interpret and analyze written works, ultimately facilitating their own writing development (Pichette, de Serres, & Lafontaine, 2012).

For students learning English as a foreign language (EFL), vocabulary acquisition sits at the core of their development, playing a crucial role in their overall proficiency (Lawrence, Capotosto, Branum-Martin, White, & Snow, 2012). A central question for both learners and educators, therefore, is: how much vocabulary is it essential for EFL students to know? However, research conducted by the author at two MTs Negeri schools in Padangsidimpuan (MTs Negeri 1 and 2) among Grade 8 students revealed significant difficulties faced by learners in the process of acquiring English vocabulary.

Two recurring difficulties emerged during the study. Firstly, students frequently encountered novel vocabulary during classroom activities, leading to a dilemma. Lacking the requisite noun vocabulary, they were forced to improvise, often resorting to inaccurate or incomplete expressions. This highlights the need for deeper qualitative research in real-world settings to gain a more nuanced understanding of students' specific vocabulary challenges.

Secondly, a significant proportion of students demonstrated limited active vocabulary. Direct observation of Ms. Yusniati's class revealed that many students struggled to communicate in even simple English utterances. This inability, largely attributable to limited vocabulary, restricted their ability to express themselves effectively and fostered a fear of ridicule, particularly when attempting to name objects in the classroom setting. The perceived risk of incorrect pronunciation or word choice further hindered their verbal participation.

To further corroborate the teacher's observations, the researcher conducted supplementary data collection. This included interviewing Ms. Nila Suaidah Lubis, S.Pd., an English teacher at MTs N 2 Padangsidimpuan. Consistent with the initial findings, Ms. Lubis highlighted the students' limited vocabulary as a significant barrier to their learning. She noted that this deficit impacted their ability to comprehend spoken and written English, hindering both their listening and reading comprehension. Consequently, the students struggled to express themselves fluently and accurately in spoken and written forms of English.

Moreover, the students have some problems in vocabulary mastery, such as bad pronunciation, difficult to understand new words, and the worst problem is that students do not know many words. The problems are caused by several reasons such as students' educational background, their less practice, interesting and motivation, their bad mindset

about English, and the teacher's problems like less strategies in teaching. The study categorized this as a big problem and as a gap to be analyzed.

Vocabulary acquisition in learning English as a foreign language presents both challenges and opportunities. Students often encounter difficulties in areas such as pronunciation, spelling, word usage, and retention of vocabulary (Rosyada-AS & Apoko, 2023). To overcome these challenges, students employ various strategies such as using media resources, note-taking techniques, and consulting dictionaries (Stakić & Arsić, 2022). Additionally, the acquisition of polysemous words and idioms requires consistency, continuity, and understanding of contextual meaning (Zeng et al., 2022). Starting the enrichment of vocabulary with such lexical layers at an early age is crucial (Plomteux, 2019). Furthermore, the frequency, polysemy, and cognateness of words positively contribute to vocabulary acquisition, while word length and lexicalization have a negative impact (Hayakawa, Bartolotti, van den Berg, & Marian, 2020). Online learning platforms, such as MOODLE, offer new opportunities for vocabulary practice and testing, with immediate correction and feedback possibilities . Overall, while vocabulary acquisition poses challenges, employing effective strategies and utilizing various resources can enhance the learning process .

Furthermore, this study identified several key challenges students face in mastering vocabulary. These include pronounced difficulties with pronunciation, comprehending new vocabulary, and, most significantly, a limited overall vocabulary size. Underlying these challenges are a range of potential factors, including prior educational experiences, inadequate practice, low engagement and motivation, negative attitudes towards English, and potentially ineffective teaching strategies. The researcher views these limitations as a critical issue and a significant gap in their language development, warranting further investigation and analysis.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the specific challenges grade VIII students at MTs Negeri in Padangsidimpuan encounter in acquiring language and mastering vocabulary. Additionally, it will investigate the strategies and methodologies employed by teachers to assist students in overcoming these challenges. By thoroughly analyzing these factors, the study seeks to contribute valuable insights into effective vocabulary teaching and learning practices for this specific context.

Methods
The Place and Time of Research

The research timeframe encompassed the period from August 2019 to the end of 2021. This timeframe covered the entire research process, from proposal development to final data analysis and report writing. The study investigated the real-world difficulties faced by students in learning vocabulary. The research setting was specifically focused on Grade 8 classes in two MTs Negeri (State Middle Schools) in Padangsidimpuan, North Sumatra, during the 2020/2021 academic semester. These schools were MTs Negeri 1 Padangsidimpuan, located at Jalan Sutan Sori Pada Mulia, Sadabuan, North Padangsidimpuan, and MTs Negeri 2 Padangsidimpuan, located in Southeast Padangsidimpuan.

The Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach. This methodology involved in-depth data analysis to reveal the characteristics and complexities of the

phenomenon under investigation (Kahlke, 2014). Specifically, the research utilized a case study design, focusing on the experiences of Grade 8 students from two MTs Negeri schools in Padangsidimpuan during the 2020/2021 academic semester. Through interviews, observations, and document analysis, the study explored the language items students found challenging and their strategies for overcoming these difficulties. The collected data was then subjected to detailed descriptive analysis.

The Sources of the Data

This study employed a stratified random sampling method to select participants from two MTs Negeri schools in Padangsidimpuan: MTs Negeri 1 and MTs Negeri 2. Stratified sampling ensures proportional representation of the larger population within the sample based on specific characteristics–in this case, school. Random sampling within each stratum then guarantees equal likelihood of selection for every individual student.

Due to the varying sizes of the Grade VIII student populations at each school (129 in MTs Negeri 1 and 158 in MTs Negeri 2), different sample sizes were chosen while maintaining proportionality. For MTs Negeri 1, a 10% sample size yielded 13 participants, satisfying the minimum recommended sample size for qualitative research and maintaining proportionality with the smaller population. For MTs Negeri 2, a 10% sample size would have resulted in 15.8 participants, which was rounded up to 16 participants for practical reasons and to maintain proportionality with the larger student population. Therefore, a total of 30 participants (13 from MTs Negeri 1 and 16 from MTs Negeri 2) were selected through a random lottery technique to ensure unbiased selection.

To enrich the understanding of students' vocabulary learning difficulties, this study also collected supplementary data from key informants: five English teachers and the headmaster of MTs Negeri Padangsidimpuan. Three teachers were interviewed from MTs Negeri 1 (Nikmatul Hijrah Gultom, S.Pd., Yusniati Nasution, S.Sos., S.Pd., and Dra. Misrayana Harahap, S.Pd.) and two from MTs Negeri 2 (Sri Ertina Siregar, S.Pd., and Nila Suaidah Lubis, S.Pd.). Unfortunately, one teacher from MTs Negeri 2 was unavailable for the interview. The headmaster's insights were sought to provide additional context and perspective on the school's approach to vocabulary learning and potential factors influencing student difficulties. These interviews explored the teachers' and headmaster's perspectives on the students' vocabulary challenges and the strategies employed to address them. This supplementary data provided valuable insights into the classroom environment, teaching practices, and potential systemic factors that might contribute to or alleviate the students' difficulties.

The Instruments of Collecting the Data

This study will employ three key data collection instruments: interviews, observations, and a vocabulary test. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with participants. This method involves the researcher utilizing a prepared interview guide with both open-ended and closed-ended questions to gather in-depth information about students' experiences and perspectives on their vocabulary learning challenges. The interview guide will explore topics such as: Difficulties with pronunciation and spelling, Challenges with word length and complexity, Understanding multiple meanings of the same word, Factors contributing to these difficulties, Teacher strategies employed to address vocabulary learning issues.

This study employed direct observation as a data collection method. This involved the researcher observing classroom interactions and activities without intervening or influencing the natural flow of the teaching and learning process. The focus of the observation was twofold. First, to examine the physical environment and resources available for supporting English vocabulary learning. This included observing the location and condition of equipment, facilities, and instructional materials related to vocabulary instruction. Second, to analyze the pedagogical practices and student engagement during English vocabulary lessons. This involved observing the teacher's techniques for introducing and reinforcing vocabulary, as well as the students' responses and participation in vocabulary learning activities.

Results and Discussion

Identifying Obstacles in Students' Climb to Vocabulary Mastery

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the data, the researchers employed several strategies. Firstly, in-depth follow-up interviews were conducted with a selection of participants to clarify and confirm their initial responses regarding their difficulties and the underlying causes of their challenges in developing and learning vocabulary. This facilitated triangulation, strengthening the validity of the findings by utilizing multiple data sources and perspectives. Secondly, the researchers expanded their scope by interviewing additional stakeholders. This included interviews with English teachers and administrators from both MTs Negeri schools. The teachers were asked to share their insights into specific difficulties students face in learning vocabulary, the types of vocabulary that pose particular challenges, and the strategies they employ to support students and address these difficulties. The administrators' perspectives provided valuable context on the overall learning environment and potential systemic factors contributing to the students' challenges. Finally, the second round of interviews followed the initial data collection phase, which included classroom observations of the physical environment, equipment, facilities, and the teaching and learning process. This allowed the researchers to contextualize the interview data and gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics within the classrooms.

The interview data revealed that both students participants, Raja Syahputra Rambe and Ahmad Hilman, identified pronunciation and understanding multiple word types as major challenges in their vocabulary learning. Raja specifically mentioned his struggles with pronouncing unfamiliar words and understanding the nuances of slang and idioms. Ahmad, on the other hand, highlighted the importance of regular practice and consistent repetition in solidifying vocabulary knowledge.

Ade Annisa Mora, another participant, identified vocabulary overload as a major challenge in her vocabulary learning journey. She explained that the sheer volume of new words to learn within a tight timeframe made it difficult for her to effectively memorize and retain them. This challenge was shared by other participants, including Rangga Harahap and Kaprian.

Furthermore, Ade highlighted the difficulties she faced in understanding multi-word items, such as collocations and phrasal verbs, which often have meanings that deviate from their constituent words. She provided the example of "take," which has different meanings in "take off" (melepas/ lepas landas) and "take" (mengambil).

Participant Dinda Siregar shared that her difficulty in learning vocabulary stemmed from her tendency to procrastinate and avoid reviewing newly learned words. She attributed this tendency to the shift to online learning, which disrupted her study routine and made it harder for her to maintain focus. As a result, she found it challenging to grasp the concepts and retain the vocabulary learned during online sessions, which only occurred twice a week.

Participants Fadhilah, Juhriah, and Widya shared similar challenges in correctly positioning vocabulary within sentences. They cited examples like the proper usage of "he, him, and his" in different contexts. The difficulty in mastering these grammatical aspects hindered their overall vocabulary acquisition. Additionally, they attributed the challenges to the reduced English learning time during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to increased forgetting of newly learned material.

Raisyah Ramadhani further shared her struggles with vocabulary learning, particularly in distinguishing words with similar spellings but different meanings. She mentioned the difficulty of correctly identifying the appropriate word based on context in writing, speaking, reading, and listening tasks. Additionally, she expressed her confusion with words that have multiple meanings or change their meaning upon the addition of a single word. These challenges impeded her vocabulary acquisition efforts.

Anggina Purnama expressed her difficulties in learning vocabulary, particularly in memorizing and pronouncing words. She explained that her pronunciation struggles hindered her ability to speak and use the words correctly. However, she also acknowledged that with consistent memorization, repetition, and dedicated study, vocabulary acquisition can be achieved. This sentiment was echoed by Abdul Hadi Ritonga, Nabila Putri Farah Dina Panggabean, Najla Afrelia Harahap, and Nur Jamilah, who also shared similar challenges with memorizing and spelling words.

Participant Tohar shared his struggles with vocabulary learning, particularly in understanding the meaning of words within sentences. He explained that his limited understanding of word functions hindered his ability to grasp the overall meaning of sentences, leading to confusion when attempting to answer questions from textbooks or modules provided by teachers.

Participant Najwa Zahira expressed her difficulties in learning vocabulary, particularly in selecting appropriate words and distinguishing between similar words. She attributed these challenges to her limited vocabulary base and the lack of in-person classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. This limited her access to teacher guidance and made it challenging to grasp the nuanced usage of words. She further highlighted the difficulty of retaining newly learned vocabulary over time.

Participant Azmi Fadhilah Nasution also shared his struggles in acquiring vocabulary, specifically comprehending the meanings of unfamiliar words. He explained that the sheer volume of vocabulary presented in textbooks overwhelmed him, making it difficult to effectively internalize and retain new words. This led to rapid forgetting of recently learned vocabulary.

Participant Susan Mandala Putri Pandiangan shared her struggles with vocabulary learning, particularly distinguishing between verb forms with similar spellings. She attributed these challenges to the lack of in-person interactions during online learning, which limited opportunities to practice and internalize verb forms through repetition and interaction with peers and teachers.

Upon interviewing the students, the researchers concluded that their primary difficulties in vocabulary learning were: lack of long-term retention, ephemeral memorization, pronunciation, spelling, meaning, complexity, grammar.

Teacher Strategies for Building a Strong Vocabulary Foundation

After interviewing students, the researchers turned their attention to the teachers' perspectives on vocabulary teaching strategies. Two teachers, Nikmatul Hijrah Gultom and Misrayana Harahap, revealed a common approach to vocabulary instruction. They began by assigning students to read the text that would be the focus of the subsequent lesson. Next, students identified unfamiliar words and consulted a dictionary to determine their meanings. After memorizing these words, students engaged in peer activities, including sharing the meanings of the words and playing a game of Pictionary, where they drew and guessed words in English. Additionally, students received homework assignments to reinforce their learning. The teachers also employed cooperative learning, oral methods, and CTL (Content-Based Instruction) to address the students' difficulties in vocabulary acquisition.

Another teacher, Yusniati Nasution, shared her strategy for vocabulary instruction. She emphasized the importance of contextual learning by encouraging students to observe their surroundings and identify vocabulary based on their observations. She further facilitated vocabulary acquisition by having students pronounce and write down the words, reinforcing their memorization and long-term retention. To enhance the learning process, Yusniati incorporated popular songs, replacing lyrics with vocabulary-related content to make the learning experience more engaging and memorable. She also categorized vocabulary based on word class, dividing words into categories such as classroom items, household items, and outdoor objects. Finally, she encouraged students to practice and reinforce their learning through peer-based tasks, ensuring active engagement and retention.

Another teacher, Nila Suaidah Lubis, shared her approach to vocabulary instruction. She initiated learning by presenting students with questions about daily objects and conversations, encouraging them to look up the definitions of unfamiliar words. If students struggled, Nila employed a guessing technique to facilitate meaning comprehension. If guessing proved ineffective, students consulted a dictionary to acquire the precise word meanings. After acquiring vocabulary, students were tasked with writing the words in phrases that reflected their daily activities. Additionally, Nila developed a module on parts of speech and simple present tense, providing students with a structured resource for learning and using vocabulary in context. To address students' difficulties, Nila incorporated repetition, writing, and understanding as key teaching strategies.

The final English teacher interviewed, Sri Ertina Siregar, shared her strategies for addressing students' vocabulary challenges. She emphasized the importance of repetition, writing, and active usage to facilitate long-term retention and understanding. Students were encouraged to repeat unfamiliar words after the teacher, creating a list of new vocabulary, and incorporating these words into both classroom and out-of-class interactions. Recognizing the students' difficulties with verb tenses, Siregar required them to actively use the new vocabulary within sentences, ensuring proper grammatical usage.

The researchers' observations of English classrooms corroborated the teachers' statements during the interviews. The observations focused on classrooms where students were learning English. Since the English handbook or module for the eighth grade is

standardized across all classes, the English materials were consistent across classrooms. During the observations, the researchers meticulously documented classroom activities to gather relevant data. The results of the observations revealed that the teachers employed effective teaching methodologies for English instruction.

English teachers effectively address students' vocabulary challenges by guiding them in using dictionaries, incorporating a variety of visual aids, incorporating music and games, and employing a range of teaching strategies(Ghalebi, Sadighi, & Bagheri, 2020). These methods foster student engagement and enhance their ability to comprehend and utilize new vocabulary effectively (Nematollahi, Behjat, & Kargar, 2017).

Employing a variety of media, including whiteboards, digital devices, and online resources, the teachers effectively delivered vocabulary instruction, pronunciation guidelines, and illustrative examples of vocabulary usage within sentences or texts (Chotimah, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the use of screens and mobile devices for learning, limiting face-to-face classroom interactions (Budiyani & Sujarwo, 2020). Consequently, teachers relied on the internet to access and utilize educational materials, particularly in the realm of vocabulary acquisition. By incorporating media into the vocabulary learning process, students demonstrated a better understanding of the teacher's explanations and the provided materials (Munir, 2016).

Students can also benefit from utilizing the internet to enhance their understanding and learning of vocabulary (Bakar & Nosratirad, 2013). In today's digital age, internet access is readily available to students, making it incredibly simple to access a wealth of information (Hakim, 2019). With a single click, students can gain access to a vast array of educational resources, including vocabulary definitions, examples of usage, and interactive exercises (Arıkan & Taraf, 2010). This readily available information can significantly aid students in comprehending vocabulary and expanding their linguistic proficiency (Hazar, 2020).

Conclusion

The study on vocabulary acquisition among grade VIII students at MTs Negeri in Padangsidimpuan has unveiled a range of challenges that impede the effective learning and retention of new vocabulary. These challenges, identified as limited vocabulary base, insufficient motivation, habitual learning patterns, and the absence of structured repetition techniques, collectively hinder students' ability to internalize and utilize vocabulary effectively.

English teachers at the institution recognize the urgency of addressing these difficulties and have implemented a multifaceted approach to vocabulary instruction. Interactive games, engaging songs, and visual aids have been incorporated into the curriculum, transforming the learning process into an engaging and immersive experience. These methods not only enhance active engagement but also reinforce vocabulary acquisition through association and context-based learning. Additionally, teachers emphasize the importance of homework as a means of continuous practice and review, ensuring that vocabulary retention becomes a habitual practice rather than a fleeting endeavor. By implementing these effective strategies, English teachers at MTs Negeri in Padangsidimpuan are fostering a culture of vocabulary mastery, empowering students to navigate the linguistic landscape with confidence and fluency.

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