A STUDY ON STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN LEARNING VOCABULARY

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Abstract

The objectives of the research entitled "A Study on Students' Difficulties in Learning Vocabulary" were to find out kinds and factors of students' difficulties in learning vocabulary. The subject of this study was the students of the first semester of English Education Department at IAIN who took vocabulary class. This study employed a qualitative research design, implementing characteristics of a case study. For gaining the data, the researcher used interview and questionnaire. All the data were analyzed descriptively. The findings showed that the students still faced the problems or difficulties in vocabulary learning. Kinds of difficulties faced by students in vocabulary learning were various. Kinds of difficulties faced by the students were (1) almost all of the students have difficulties in pronouncing the words, (2) how to write and spell, (3) the different grammatical form of a word known as inflections was one of causes of students difficulties in learning vocabulary. In addition, (4) the students found difficulties in choosing the appropriate meaning of the words and (5) also still confuse in using the word based on the context. The last, (6) the students were also still confuse when they found words or expression that were idiomatic. There were some factors that caused students' difficulties in learning vocabulary (1) the written form is different from the spoken form in English, (2) The number of words that students need to learn is exceedingly large, (3) the limitations of sources of information about words, (4) The complexity of word knowledge. Knowing a words involves much more than knowing its dictionary definition, (5) causes of lack of understanding of grammatical of the words, (6) the incorrect pronunciation is often caused by the lack of sound similarity between English and the students' native language.

Key words: difficulty, vocabulary, qualitative research design

Introduction

Vocabulary plays important role in language learning. Vocabulary is also an essential skill for learning to read, speak, write and listen. Without sufficient vocabulary, people cannot communicate and express their feeling both in form of

spoken and written effectively. The more people master vocabulary the more they can speak, write, read and listen as they want. Wilkins in Thornbury (2004: 13) states that without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed. It means that even someone has good grammar but it will be useless if they do not know many vocabularies. In addition, it is supported by Ur (1996: 60) that vocabulary is one of important things to be taught in learning foreign language because it will be impossible to speak up without variety of words. Those statements imply the importance of teaching vocabulary as a foreign language.

In line with learning English vocabulary, English vocabulary is different from Indonesian viewed from form, including pronunciation and spelling, meaning and the word use. In addition, the way of how pronouncing the word is quite different from writing. Therefore, people especially students who learn English often find difficulties in learning vocabulary. Thus, in this research, the researcher wants to investigate the students' difficulties and factors causing difficulties in learning vocabulary.

A. Theoretical Foundation

1. The Definition of Vocabulary

Learning a new language cannot be separated from vocabulary. Meaning that in learning a new language people have to know its vocabulary. Vocabulary can be defined in various ways. Experts have proposed some terms about vocabulary. According to Richards and Renandya (2002: 255), vocabulary is a core component of language proficiency and provides much of the basis for how learners speak, listen, read and write. Without an extensive vocabulary and strategies for acquiring new vocabulary, learners often achieve their potential and may be discouraged from making use of language learning opportunities around them such as listening to the radio, listening to the native speaker, using language in different context, reading or watching television.

The other definition of vocabulary states from Hatch and Brown (1995: 1), they say that vocabulary refers to a list or set of words for a particular language or a list or set of words that individual speakers of language might use. Hatch and

Brown (1995:1) also state that vocabulary is the only system involved of alphabetical order.

Ur (1994: 60) defines vocabulary as the words we teach in the foreign language. In addition, Brown (2001: 377) views vocabulary items as a boring list of words that must be defined and memorized by the students, lexical forms are seen in their central role in contextualized, meaningful language. Richard in Schmitt (1997: 241) also states that knowing a word meaning knowing how often it occurs, the company it keeps, its appropriatness in different situations, its syntatic behavior, its underlying form and derivations, its word associations, and its semantic features.

Vocabulary is central to second language (L2) acquisition. As McCarthy (1990: 140) states that without words to express a wider range of meanings, communication in an L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way. Nation in Schmitt (2000: 5) proposes a list of the different kinds of knowledge that a person must master in order to know a words: the meaning of word, the written form of the word, the spoken form of the word, the grammatical behavior of the word, the collocations of the word, the register of the word, the association of the word, and the frequency of the word.

Hebert and Kamil (2005: 3) define vocabulary is the knowledge of meanings of words. The term *vocabulary* has a range of meanings. For example, some teachers use the term to mean *sight-word vocabularies,* referring to students' immediate recognition of words in print; other teachers refer to words students understand as their *meaning vocabularies.* Still other teachers use the term to mean *listening vocabularies,* or students' understanding of words that they hear in the spoken language. Content teachers use the term *academic vocabulary* to refer to content-specific words. Within this section, we use the term *vocabulary* to refer to students' understanding of oral and print words. Vocabularies include conceptual knowledge of words that goes well beyond a simple dictionary definition. Students' vocabulary knowledge is a building process that occurs over time as they make connections to other words, learn examples and non-examples of the word and related words, and use the word accurately within the context of the sentence (Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 2005).

Based on those statements, it can be assumed that vocabulary is a list of words as a basic component of language proficiency which has a form or expression and contains of aspects, they are meaning, use of word, form (pronunciation and spelling).

2. The Importance of Vocabulary

Vocabulary learning is very important for people who learn English both as foreign language and as second language. Tozcu and Coady (2004: 473) point out learning vocabulary is an important aspect of language two and foreign language acquisition and academic achievement and is vital to reading comprehension and proficiency, to which it is closely linked. Moreover, Heubener (1965: 88) states that learning of vocabulary is based on the formation of spesific habits. Since this involves the association of symbols and their meaning, it is clear that an enrichment of the meaning of the word is as important as its frequent repetition.

In addition, according to Grauberg (1997: 15) the process of learning vocabulary involves four stages:

a. Discrimination

This is the basic step. It involves the ability to distinguish sounds, letters from those next to them, and from the sounds and letters of similar words when listening and reading; to keep them distinct when speaking and writing. As will be seen later, failure to discriminate is a frequent source of error.

b. Understanding meaning

This means understanding the concept of the foreign word or phrase. Often this is straightforward because the word can be related to its referent by direct association or because there is equivalent word in English.

c. Remembering

The next step after intoducing and explaining new material is to ensure its retention. Once learners have found out the meaning of a word, they have no reason to attend to it any more, and it will be forgotten.

d. Consolidation and extension of meaning

Learning new words is not an instantaneous processif it were, and if presentation were the only critical variable involved, then words would not be forgotten and need to be relearned. As it is, however, it seems that words are absorbed slowly overtime, and that only gradually do they become fully integrated into the learner's personal stock of words, when he can use them with the same sort of fluency that characterizes the words he uses in his native language (Meara as cited in Grauberg (1997: 22). Achieving lexical command is a slow process. If one tries to analyze this process by relating it to linguistic description of vocabulary learning, pronunciation and spelling are probably acquired first, after the understanding of meaning, control over morphological forms and syntatic links comes next and full semantic knowledge is last.

3. Types of Vocabulary

Hiebert and Kamil (2005: 3) propose word has two forms, first oral vocabulary is the set of words for which we know the meanings when we speak or read orally. Second, print vocabulary consists of those words for which the meaning is known when we write or read silently. They also define knowledge of words also comes in at least two forms as follows:

a. Productive vocabulary

Productive vocabulary is the set of words that an individual can use when writing or speaking. They are words that are well-known, familiar, and used frequently.

b. Receptive or recognition vocabulary

Receptive or recognition vocabulary is that set of words for which an individual can assign meanings when listening or reading. These are words that are often less well known to students and less frequent in use. Individuals may be able assign some sort of meaning to them, even though they may not know the full subtleties of the distinction. Typically, these are also words that individuals do not use spontaneously. However, when individuals encounter these words, they recognize them, even if imperfectly.

4. The Aspects of Vocabulary

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There are several aspects of lexis that need to be taken into account when teaching vocabulary. The list below is based on the work of Gairns and Redman (1986) in Moras:

a. Boundaries between conceptual meaning: knowing not only what lexis refers to, but also where the boundaries are that separate it from words of related meaning (e.g. cup, mug, bowl)

b. Polysemy: distinguishing between the various meaning of a single word form with several but closely related meanings (head: of a person, of a pin, of an organization).

c. Homonymy: distinguishing between the various meaning of a single word form which has several meanings which are not closely related (e.g. a file: used to put papers in or a tool).

d. Homophony: understanding words that have the same pronunciation but different spellings and meanings (e.g. flour, flower).

e. Synonymy: distinguishing between the different shades of meaning that synonymous words have (e.g. extend, increase, expand).

f. Affective meaning: distinguishing between the attitudinal and emotional factors (denotation and connotation), which depend on the speakers attitude or the situation. A Socio-cultural association of lexical items is another important factor.

g. Style, register, dialect: Being able to distinguish between different levels of formality, the effect of different contexts and topics, as well as differences in geographical variation.

h. Translation: awareness of certain differences and similarities between the native and the foreign language (e.g. false cognates).

i. Grammar of vocabulary: learning the rules that enable students to build up different forms of the word or even different words from that word (e.g. sleep, slept, sleeping; able, unable; disability).

j. Pronunciation: ability to recognize and reproduce items in speech

In line with Gairns and Redman, Ur (1996: 60) states that there are some items need to be taught in teaching vocabulary as follows:

a. Form: pronunciation and spelling

A learner has to know what word sounds or its pronunciation and what it looks or its spelling. These are obvious characteristics and one or the other will be perceived by the learner when encountering the item for the first time. In teaching, teachers need to make sure that both of these aspects are accurately presented and learned.

b. Grammar

The grammar of a new item will be necessary to be taught if this not obviously covered by general grammatical rules. An item may have an unpredictable change of form in certain grammatical context may have some idiosyncratic with other words in sentences; it is important to provide learners with this information at the same time as teachers teach based form. When teaching a new verb, for example, teachers must give also its past form, if it is irregular (think, thought). Similarly, when teaching noun, teachers must present its plural form, if it is irregular (mouse, mice), or draw learners' attention to the noun having no plural at all (advise, information). In presenting verbs such as *want* and *enjoy*, teachers also have to present kinds of verb following them (*want to, enjoy-ing*).

c. Collocation

The typical collocation of particular items are another factor that makes a particular combination becomes 'right' or 'wrong' in a given context. Collocation is word partners, for example *make mistake* not *do mistake* and *do homework* not *make homework*. Therefore, this is also another information about a new item which may be worth teaching. In introducing words for example decision and conclusion, the teacher may not that he/she takes or makes one. Collocations are often noted in dictionaries, either by providing the whole collocation under one of the head-words or by a note in parentheses.

d. Aspect of meaning: denotation, connotation, appropriateness

The meaning of a word is divided into two aspects, denotation and connotation. Denotation refers to the literal meaning of a word, the dictionary definition. For example, the word *snake* in a dictionary, its denotative meanings is any of numerous scaly, legless, sometimes a venomous reptile having a long, tapering,

cylindrical body and found in most tropical and temperate regions. Connotation, on the other hand, refers to the associations that are connected to a certain word or the emotional suggestions related to that word. The connotative meanings of a word exist together with the denotative meanings. The connotations for the word *snake* could include evil or danger. A more suitable aspect of meaning that often needs to be taught is whether a particular item is the appropriate one to be used in a certain context or not. For example, learners may know that *weep* is virtually synonymous in denotation with *cry*, but it is more formal, tends to be used in writing than in speech, and generally it is less common.

e. Aspect of meaning: meaning relationship

How the meaning of one item relates to the meaning of others can also be useful in teaching. There are various meaning relationships, for examples:

1) Synonyms: items that mean the same or nearly the same, for example *bright*, *clever*, and *smart* may serve as synonyms of *intelligent*.

2) Antonyms: items that mean the opposite, for example: *rich* is an antonym of *poor*.

3) Hyponyms: items that serve as specific examples of a general concept, for example: *dog*, *lion*, and *mouse* are hyponyms of animal.

4) Co-hyponyms or co-ordinated: other items that are the same kind of things, for examples: *red*, *blue*, *green*, and *brown* are co-ordinates.

5) Superordinates: general concepts that cover specific item, for example: *animal* is superordinate of *dog*, *lion*, and *mouse*.

6) Translation: words or expressions in the learner's mother tongue that are more or less equivalent in meaning to the item being taught.

7) Word formation

Vocabulary items, whether one-word or multi-word, can often be broken down into their component. Word formation is the creation of a new word. The mechanisms of word formation are:

a) Agglutination: the process of forming new words from existing ones by adding affixes to them, like *shame + less + ness → shamelessness.*

b) Back-formation: removing seeming affixes from existing words, like forming *edit* from *editor.*

c) Blending: a word formed by joining parts of two or more older words, like *smog*, which comes from *smoke* and *fog*. There are two mechanisms of word blending:

    (1) Acronym: a word formed from initial letters of the words in a phrase, like English *laser* from *light amplified by stimulated emission of radiation.*

    (2) Clipping: taking part of an existing word, like forming *ad* from *advertisement.*

d) Calque: borrowing a word or phrase from another language by literal, word-for-word or root-for-root translation; for example the English phrase *to lose face*, which is a calque from Chinese.

e) Compound: a word formed by stringing together older words, like *earthquake*.

f) Conversion: forming a new word from an existing identical one, like forming the verb *green* from the existing adjective.

g) Neologism: a completely new word, like *quark*.

Nation (2000: 40) proposes what learners need to know about the word. First, he states that if the word to be learned is only receptive use (listening or reading), there is one set of answers. Second, if the word to be learned is for receptive and productive (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), there will be additional set of answers. It can be seen in table 2.1.

Table 2.1. Knowing a Word

Form		
Spoken form	R	What does the word sound like?
	P	How is the word pronounced?
Written form	R	What does the word look like?
	P	How is the word written and spelled?

Position		
Grammatical pattern	R	In what pattern does the word occur?
	P	In what pattern must we use the word?
Collocation	R	What words or types of words can be expected before or after the word?
	P	What words or types of words must we use with this word?
Function		
Frequency	R	How common is the word?
	P	How often should the word be used?
Appropriateness	R	Where would we expect to meet this word?
	P	Where can this word be used?
Meaning		
Concept	R	What does the word mean?
	P	What word should be used to express this meaning?
Association	R	What other words does this word make us think of?
	P	What other words could we use instead of this one?

R is receptive knowledge   P is productive knowledge

Gower, Philips and Walters (1995: 144) define some aspects of a vocabulary item should the teacher consider as follows:

a. The form

1) What part of speech is the word-noun,verb, preposition, etc?

2) How is it spelled-is it regular or irregular?

3) Does it belong to a 'family' of words, for example electricity, electrical, electrician.

4) How is the word, or combination of words, pronunced and, in word or more than one syllable, where is the stress?

5) How does the word collocate with surrounding words? Is it part of set expression?

b. The meaning

1) Many words have more than one meaning. What exact meaning in which context do you want to focus on?

2) What is the connotation of the item?

3) Could the vocabulary item have different meanings for different people?

c. The use

1) How is the vocabulary item used?

2) Does it have a restricted use? Does it belong to a particular style or register?

5. Difficulties in Vocabulary

The first steps in succesful teaching vocabulary are to identify the difficulties that faced by the students. Thornbury (2004: 27) proposes some factors that make some words more difficult as follows:

a. Pronunciation

Research shows that words that are difficult to pronounce are more difficult to learn.

b. Spelling

Sounds-spelling mismatches are likely to be the cause of errors, either of pronunciation or of spelling, and can contribute to a word's difficulty. While most English spelling is fairly law-abiding, there are also some glaring irregularities. Words that contain silent letters are particularly problematic: foreign, listen, headache, climbing, bored, honest, cupboard, muscle, etc.

a. Lenght and complexity

Long words seem to be no more difficult to learn than short ones. But, as a rule of thumb, high frequency words tend to be short in English, and therefore the learner is likely to meet them more often, a factor favouring their "learnability".

b. Grammar

Also problematic is the grammar associated with the word, especially if this differs from that of its L1 equivalent. Remembering whether a verb like *enjoy, love*, or *hope* is followed by an infinitive (to swim) or an –ing form (swimming) can add to its difficulty.

c. Meaning

When two words overlap in meaning, learners are likely to confuse them. *Make* and *do* are a case in point: you *make breakfast* and *make an appointment*, but you *do the housework* and *do a questionnaire*.

f. Range, connotation and idiomaticity

Words that can be used in a wide range of contexts will generally be perceived as easier than their synonyms with a narrower range. Thus, *put* is a very wide-ranging verb, compared to *impose, place, position*, etc. Likewise, *thin* is a safer bet than *skinny, slim, slender*. Uncertainty as to the connotations of some words may cause problems too. Thus, *propaganda* has negative connotations in English, but its equivalent may simply mean *publicity*. On the other hand, *eccentric* does not have negative connotations in English, but its nearest equivalent in other languages may be *deviant*. Finally, words or expression that are idiomatic (like *make up your mind*, *keep an eye on....*) will generally be more difficult than words whose meaning is transparent (*decide, watch*).

Gower, Philips and Walter (1995: 143) explain what makes a vocabulary item is easy or difficult. How easy or difficult a vocabulary item is can depend on a number of factors:

a. Similarity to L1

The difficulty of a vocabulary item is often depends on how similar the items is in the form and meaning to the students' first language. Words which are similar in the first language and English may be misleading rather than helpul.

b. Similarity to English words already known

Once students have some English then a word which is related to an English word they are already familiar with is easier one which is not. For example, if students have already met the word friendly they should be able to guess the meaning of unfriendly.

c. Connotation

Another difficult aspect that learners have to get grips with is the connotation of the word. For example, does the word have positive or negative connotation to a native speaker? Either skinny and slim could be used to describe someone who is thin – but these words are very different in their connotation and by choosing one rather than the other the speaker conveys a particular attitude.

d. Spelling and pronunciation

The spelling of many English words can cause problems for students who speak languages with very regular spelling system. Particular spelling patterns can also cause confusion where the pronunciation is concerned. For example, it

is easy to understand why many students confuse the meaning, spelling and pronunciation of these words: through, though, thought, tough, thorough.

e. Multi-word items

A lexical item may consist of more than one word, as in a compound noun such as tennis shoes or sports car, or a phrasal verb such as to put someone up. Phrasal verb are notoriously difficult for learners of English because they are made up of simple words (often prepositions or adverbs).

f. Collocation

How a lexical item collocate (or 'goes with' other items) can also cause difficulty. For example, people are *injured* or *wounded* but things are *damaged,* and we can say a *strong wind* and *strong coffee* – but it's a *light* wind not a *weak* wind and *weak* coffee not *light* coffee.

g. Appropriate use

When to use vocabulary appropriately is also problematical. Some words and expressions are restricted to use in particular context (for example, we can use *pushing* to mean *almost* in *He is pushing fifty.* But *pushing* is only used in this way with older people – we do not say *he is pushing there*!). Also it is important that students know whether the word or phrase has a marked *style* – informal or formal.

B. Research Methodology

This research was a descriptive qualitative method, implementing characteristics of a case study in which the writer investigated the students' difficulties and factor causing difficulties in learning vocabulary. The data collecting technique used in this research were questionnaire and interview. Both questionnaire and interview were done to know kinds and factors students' difficulties in learning vocabulary. In this research, the reseacher chose the first semester of English Education Department at IAIN Raden Intan Lampung who took vocabulary class. There are seven classes but the researcher only took one class. One class consists of 36 students. The sample in this study was chosen randomly from the population of cluster which is usually called cluster random sampling. The sample was chosen by using lottery.

C. Result and Discussion

The result of interview and questionnaire are as follow:

Research Category I

1. Kinds of Difficulties

From the result of interview and questionnaire, it was found that almost all of the students have difficulties in pronouncing the words, how to write and spell, how to use in grammatical pattern correctly. The different grammatical form of a word known as inflections was one of causes of students difficulties in learning vocabulary. It is supported by Haryanto (2007). It is argues so far that learning grammar cannot be separated from learning a foreign language. In fact, learning freign language becomes difficult since the target language has different system from the native language. Further Haryanto adds that even someone learns a foreign language, he often faces interference when s/he applies his/her mother tongue or first language structure to structure of the foreign language which is different from his/her native language. In addition, the students found difficulties in choosing the appropriate meaning of the words, for example sometimes they usually overlap the meaning of the words such as the use of do and make. The students are also still confuse in using the word based on the context. The last, the students are also still confuse when they found words or expression that are idiomatic (like *make up your mind*, *keep an eye on....*). It will generally be more difficult than words whose meaning is transparent (*decide, watch*).

Research Category 2

1. Factors of Difficulties.

The data from interview indicated the same with the result of questionnaire as well. There were some factors of difficulties in learning vocabulary. First, the students faced the difficulties in pronouncing the words because of the

differences between spoken and written in English. For example, when the students pronounce the word muscle, listen, write, honor, and honest. Some words that contain silent letters are particularly problematic especially for Indonesian students. The incorrect pronunciation is often caused by the lack of sound similarity between English and the students' native language. This is in line with what Varasarin (2007) described that in this situation, the students wish they could speak English fluently but most of them think that English is too challenging for them to master. Regarding this, some expert view incorrect pronunciation has been caused by intruction goal and the teacher himself and the teaching and learning in this area which is inappropriate (Varasarin, 2007). Second, the problem in writing the words or sounds-spelling mismatches. As the reseacher stated before that it caused by the differences between Indonesian and English. The written form is different from the spoken form in English. When the students want to write a word "muscle", they just write the word that they heard "mussel". Third, the students found difficulties in choosing the appropriate meaning of the words, for example sometimes they usually overlap the meaning of the words such as the use of do and make. *Make* and *do* are a case in point: you *make breakfast* and *make an appointment*, but you *do the housework* and *do a questionnaire*. In this case the students looks for the word in his mind and does not know the exact collocation. He tries to find the words that best fit the sentence semantically, so he tries to pick up the word which is closest in meaning. Howerver the choice could not be undoubtedly correct, since the students randomly selected the word. If the choice of word is not correct the whole meaning of the word may be distorted.

Fourth, the different grammatical form of a word known as inflections was one of causes of students difficulties in learning vocabulary. The example is affixation, affixation is one of the ways new words are formed from old including prefix and suffix. It is hard for the students to know the meaning of the words because by adding prefix and suffix in a words can cause the changing in word class. The changing in word classes sometimes changing the meaning of the word. Furthermore, next factor of difficulty was related to diction. The students faced the difficulty when they want to use the words

based on the context. As we know that a word consists of more than one meaning. It also can be categorized based on word classes. For example the word "can" can be as modal auxiliary but on the other hand the word "can" can be as a noun. The meaning of "can" as modal auxiliary is different from the meaning of "can" as a noun. Can as auxiliary in Indonesian is dapat or bisa but the meaning of can as noun is kaleng. The last, the students are also still confuse when they find words or expression that are idiomatic. It caused by idioms were difficult because of the lack of the cultural background. Students thinks that the cultural background affects understanding of idiomatic expessions. According to the responses gained from questionnaire, if the participants or students could not recognize the meaning of the words in the whole expression, s/he was not able to denote the meaning of the whole expressions.

D. Conclusion

Based on the theories, the findings and the analysis, the present study arrives at the conclusions. This study revealed that problems or difficulties faced by the students in vocabulary learning were various. The difficulties faced by the students were almost all of the students have difficulties in pronouncing the words, how to write and spell, the different grammatical form of a word known as inflections was one of causes of students difficulties in learning vocabulary. In addition, the students found difficulties in choosing the appropriate meaning of the words and also still confuse in using the word based on the context. The last, the students are also still confuse when they found words or expression that are idiomatic. There were some factors that caused students' difficulties in learning vocabulary (1) the written form is different from the spoken form in English, (2) The number of words that students need to learn is exceedingly large, (3) the limitations of sources of information about words, (4) The complexity of word knowledge. Knowing a words involves much more than knowing its dictionary definition, (5) causes of lack of understanding of grammatical of the words, (6) the incorrect pronunciation is often caused by the lack of sound similarity between English and the students' native language.

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