

A Descriptive Study on Students' Difficulties in Learning Vocabulary at the Eighth Grade of SMP Negeri 5 Natar

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Abstract

Vocabulary is essential in mastering English as a foreign language. It should be the first step before students develop other English skills. Preliminary research indicates that students face challenges in vocabulary learning, such as not understanding word meanings, pronunciation issues, and discrepancies between written and spoken forms. This study focused on the specific vocabulary difficulties students encounter and the factors contributing to these challenges. Using a descriptive qualitative design, the study employed purposive sampling, selecting eighth-grade E students due to their lower vocabulary scores. Data collection involved questionnaires to identify vocabulary difficulties and interviews to explore underlying factors. Data analysis included data condensation, display, and conclusion drawing. Results revealed three main difficulties: pronunciation, grammar, and meaning. Interviews further identified factors such as reluctance to use dictionaries, low motivation, and difficulty concentrating, all of which hinder students' vocabulary acquisition.

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INTRODUCTION

In English language learning, students are expected to master not only the four language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—but also key components such as vocabulary (Harmer, 2007). Vocabulary is a fundamental linguistic component in acquiring English. Before students can fully develop their English skills, they must first build a solid foundation in vocabulary, as it plays a crucial role in communicating ideas.

The study confirmed that students with a strong vocabulary are better able to understand the content of English texts and engage in meaningful communication. When speaking and listening, students with a well-developed vocabulary can communicate more effectively with others who speak English (Meisuri et al., 2022). These findings support the idea that vocabulary is a cornerstone of language acquisition, critical for both oral and written communication. Students who expand their vocabulary not only find it easier to express themselves but also gain more confidence in participating in class activities.

However, studies revealed that learning vocabulary is particularly challenging for students in Indonesia (Yuliana et al., 2024), where English is taught as a foreign language and not used in everyday communication. This limited exposure contributes to students' difficulties in mastering English vocabulary.

The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 5 Natar, focusing on eighth-grade students who were found to struggle with vocabulary learning. This school was chosen due to the persistent

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vocabulary difficulties experienced by the students, prompting further investigation. A preliminary study, including interviews with the eighth-grade teacher, highlighted several specific challenges faced by students. This included difficulty understanding word meanings, incorrect pronunciation, and the mismatch between spelling and pronunciation. The teacher attributed these difficulties to the students' elementary school background, where English instruction was minimal—on average, students in the Natar sub-district received only one year of English lessons. In some cases, students had no English instruction at all, leading to a lack of foundational vocabulary skills when they entered junior high school, which resulted in slow progress in vocabulary mastery.

As a result, students struggled with spelling, pronunciation, and comprehension of new vocabulary. The study confirmed that these eighth-grade students face significant challenges in learning vocabulary, highlighting the need for targeted strategies to support their vocabulary development.

Previous studies have focused on students' difficulties in vocabulary mastery (Herri Susanto, 2021) (BJorK & Kroll, 2015) (Lutfiyah et al., 2022). The study shares similarities with previous research, such as the use of descriptive methods and the focus on vocabulary difficulties. However, differences lie in the subjects and research objectives. Based on these findings, this study successfully analyzed the specific vocabulary learning difficulties faced by eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 5 Natar and identified factors contributing to these challenges. The analysis was carried out using questionnaires for the students' difficulties and interviews to identify contributing factors.

The study, titled "A Descriptive Study on Students' Difficulties in Learning Vocabulary at the Eighth Grade of SMP Negeri 5 Natar," provides insights into the vocabulary challenges faced by students and offers a basis for future interventions."

METHOD

The goal of this study was to investigate students' difficulties in learning vocabulary; thus, a qualitative study design was used. According to (Lodico et al., 2006), qualitative data provides a broad and reasonable description of processes occurring in a local context. This qualitative study investigated and attempted to comprehend individuals' phenomena, events, social interactions, behaviours, attitudes, values, expectations, perceptions, and thoughts, with a particular emphasis on students' vocabulary learning challenges (Creswell, 2013).

To explain students' difficulties with vocabulary learning, the researcher used a descriptive qualitative approach. According to Sugiyono, the descriptive method is designed to analyse and present research findings without going beyond the scope of the study (Sugiyono, 2014). In this context, students' vocabulary learning difficulties were described as they occurred, with no intervention. The decision to use qualitative methodology stemmed from the need to base analysis on actual findings, with a focus solely on describing students' challenges and the factors that contribute to these difficulties.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants for this study. Purposive sampling is a technique that is based on the researcher's knowledge of the population and research objectives (Ary et al., 2009). For this study, the researcher chose 30 eighth-grade students from SMP Negeri 5 Natar as data sources, with 16 male and 14 female students in class E. The English teacher chose this class because it contained many students with the lowest English scores. Students with lower scores are more likely to face greater challenges in learning English, particularly vocabulary, so this class was ideal for investigating vocabulary learning difficulties.

Data collection entailed gathering and measuring information about specified variables. Ary et al. (2006) describe several methods for gathering qualitative data, including observation, interviews, documents, questionnaires, and artefact analysis. In this study, the primary data collection methods were a questionnaire and interviews.

The researcher was the primary instrument in this qualitative study, serving as the planner, data collector, analyst, and findings reporter. In addition, supporting instruments such as a questionnaire and interviews were used to investigate students' vocabulary learning difficulties and the factors contributing to these challenges.

To detect patterns and make the findings understandable, data analysis followed an organised process. Miles and Huberman define data analysis in qualitative research as three phases: data condensation, data display, and drawing conclusions or verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These phases were used to organise and interpret the data gathered from questionnaires and interviews, resulting in a thorough understanding of the vocabulary learning challenges encountered by eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 5 Natar.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, the researcher discussed the findings on students' difficulties learning vocabulary and the factors that contribute to these difficulties in eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 5 Natar. Based on the findings of questionnaires and interviews, the researcher identified the challenges students faced when learning vocabulary. The detailed discussion is as follows.

Difficulties in Learning Vocabulary among Eighth-Grade Students at SMP Negeri 5 Natar

The researcher aimed to identify the specific aspects of vocabulary learning that posed challenges for the eighth-grade students of SMP Negeri 5 Natar. Utilizing Thornbury's theory, which outlines six essential components of vocabulary learning—pronunciation, spelling, length and complexity, grammar, meaning, and range, connotation, and idiomaticity—the researcher focused on pronunciation, spelling, grammar, and meaning. These components were chosen as they are more pertinent to the level of junior high school students and form the core of vocabulary acquisition at this stage of language learning.

Pronunciation emerged as one of the most challenging aspects of vocabulary learning for the students. According to the questionnaire results, 29 out of 30 students reported difficulty in pronouncing English vocabulary. The root of this difficulty can be traced to the stark difference between how words are written and how they are pronounced in English, which is a significant contrast to the phonetic consistency in the students' native language, Indonesian. For instance, English has many irregularities in pronunciation (e.g., "through" and "though"), and students often find it hard to reconcile these discrepancies without extensive practice.

Pronunciation difficulty can also have a ripple effect on students' overall confidence in using the language (Gooch et al., 2016). When students are unsure about how to pronounce words, they may be reluctant to speak in English, which limits their opportunities to practice and reinforce their learning. This, in turn, perpetuates a cycle of difficulty and disengagement with language learning.

Unlike pronunciation, spelling was not a major hurdle for the majority of students. According to the questionnaire, 22 out of 30 students were able to spell words correctly, which suggests that spelling, at least at this stage, was relatively manageable for most of the students. The success in spelling can be attributed to the fact that students had memorized the English alphabet and were able to recall the correct sequence of letters to form words.

However, while the ability to spell correctly might indicate familiarity with the structure of words, it does not necessarily imply a deeper understanding of the words' pronunciation or meaning. For example, many students may rely on rote memorization of spelling patterns without fully grasping how the words are pronounced or used in context (Share, 2004). This could create a gap between their ability to spell words correctly and their ability to use those words effectively in communication.

Moreover, it is worth noting that spelling difficulties can vary depending on the complexity of the words students are expected to learn. At the junior high school level, the vocabulary students encounter may not yet include many of the more irregular or complex English spellings that could pose greater challenges in the future. As students progress in their studies and are exposed to more advanced vocabulary, they may encounter greater difficulties with spelling, particularly with words that do not follow regular spelling rules.

Grammar proved to be another significant area of difficulty for the students. According to the questionnaire, 26 out of 30 students reported struggles with using vocabulary in grammatically correct sentences. The primary issue appeared to be the students' uncertainty about how to integrate vocabulary into sentences, particularly when they were unsure about the meaning of the words they were using.

Learning a word involves more than just knowing its meaning (Nagy et al., 1985); it also requires understanding how the word functions grammatically in different contexts. For example, students may learn the word "run" but struggle to use it correctly in a sentence because they are not familiar with its various grammatical forms (e.g., "running," "ran") or its usage in different tenses.

The students' difficulty with grammar suggests that vocabulary learning should be integrated with grammar instruction to help students better understand how to use words in context. Without this integration, students may learn vocabulary in isolation, which can lead to confusion when they try to apply their knowledge in real-world communication. The findings also highlight the importance of providing students with ample opportunities to practice constructing sentences using new vocabulary, as this can help reinforce both their vocabulary knowledge and their understanding of grammar.

The research findings also revealed that 28 out of 30 students had difficulty understanding the meaning of vocabulary. This challenge was rooted in the students' struggle to find the correct meaning of words and distinguish between words with similar or different meanings. For many students, this difficulty was compounded by their failure to bring dictionaries to class, which limited their ability to look up new vocabulary and fully understand its meaning.

Understanding the meaning of words is a fundamental component of vocabulary learning, as it allows students to use words accurately in communication. However, many students face challenges in this area because they are unfamiliar with the nuances of word meanings, particularly when it comes to distinguishing between words with similar meanings or understanding how words change meaning in different contexts.

Additionally, the complexity of English vocabulary can make it difficult for students to grasp the full range of meanings that a word may have (Li & Kirby, 2015). For example, a word like "bank" can refer to both a financial institution and the side of a river, and students may struggle to understand these multiple meanings without sufficient exposure to the language in different contexts.

The lack of dictionary use in class further exacerbated the students' difficulty with meaning. Dictionaries are a valuable tool for language learners, as they provide not only definitions but also examples of how words are used in sentences. Encouraging students to use dictionaries more frequently could help them build a stronger understanding of vocabulary meaning and improve their ability to use words accurately in communication.

In summary, the research identified pronunciation, grammar, and meaning as the most challenging aspects of vocabulary learning for the eighth-grade students of SMP Negeri 5 Natar. While spelling was relatively easy for most students, their struggles with pronunciation, grammar, and meaning suggest that vocabulary learning is a complex process that requires attention to multiple aspects of language. The findings highlight the need for more integrated instruction that addresses both vocabulary and grammar, as well as opportunities for students to practice pronunciation and use vocabulary in meaningful communication. Additionally, encouraging the use of dictionaries could help students overcome their difficulties with word meaning and build a stronger foundation for future vocabulary learning.

Factors Contributing to Students' Difficulties in Learning Vocabulary

One major issue highlighted in the study was students' reluctance to use dictionaries, which played a significant role in limiting their vocabulary acquisition. The interviews revealed that many students often forgot to bring dictionaries to school, leading to difficulties when encountering unfamiliar words. Without a dictionary, students were unable to check meanings during lessons, making it hard for them to learn and retain new vocabulary. This lack of resourcefulness not only hindered students from becoming independent learners but also reinforced their reliance on the teacher to provide word meanings, slowing down their overall learning process.

Furthermore, the reluctance to use dictionaries can be linked to students' previous learning experiences (Atkins & Varantola, 1997). Some students may not have been properly introduced to the importance of a dictionary as a language-learning tool, or they may have perceived it as cumbersome and time-consuming. In a foreign language learning context like Indonesia, where English is not commonly spoken outside of the classroom, relying on dictionaries is crucial for

students to expand their vocabulary knowledge. This lack of exposure to effective vocabulary-learning strategies can significantly hinder students' progress.

The lack of motivation emerged as another key factor in students' difficulties with vocabulary learning. The interviews revealed that many students viewed English as difficult to pronounce, memorize, and use, making it less appealing for them to engage in the learning process. English, being a foreign language that is not commonly used in their daily lives, may seem distant and irrelevant to the students. This disconnect between classroom learning and real-life application further diminishes their motivation to practice and use new vocabulary.

Moreover, students often struggled to remember newly learned vocabulary because they lacked consistent practice both inside and outside of the classroom (Hidayat, 2015). Vocabulary learning requires continuous reinforcement and repeated exposure to words in different contexts. However, with low motivation, students are less likely to engage in activities such as reading, watching English content, or practicing conversation, which are essential for vocabulary retention. This lack of engagement leads to what is often referred to as "surface learning," where students learn vocabulary for short-term purposes, such as passing a test, but fail to internalize the words for long-term use.

The lack of motivation could also be attributed to external factors, such as limited encouragement from their environment, including teachers, peers, and even parents (Hardré & Sullivan, 2008). When students do not see English being used or valued in their community, their intrinsic motivation to learn diminishes. Additionally, teachers may not always provide stimulating or engaging ways to present vocabulary, further lowering student interest. Motivation is a key driver of successful language learning, and when it is lacking, students' progress is inevitably slower.

The study also found that students had difficulty concentrating during vocabulary lessons due to the classroom environment, which was often noisy and distracting. Students reported that distractions from peers, such as chatting or other disruptive behavior, made it hard for them to focus on the lesson. This lack of focus hindered their ability to fully absorb and practice new vocabulary during class time.

Classroom management plays a crucial role in language learning, particularly in the acquisition of vocabulary, which requires students to pay close attention to new words, their meanings, and how they are used in sentences. A noisy and disruptive classroom environment can easily derail students' attention, making it harder for them to engage in the cognitive processes necessary for vocabulary learning, such as memorization, association, and application.

Furthermore, the lack of focus may also stem from students' inability to see the relevance or importance of learning English vocabulary, especially if the lessons are not sufficiently interactive or relatable. Traditional teaching methods that focus heavily on rote memorization without contextualizing vocabulary in engaging ways may contribute to students' boredom, leading to distractions and poor concentration.

The findings of this study are consistent with Rohmatillah's previous research, which also identified significant challenges in vocabulary learning among students (Rohmatillah, 2014). She found that pronunciation, spelling, and grammatical difficulties, as well as confusion over word meanings, were common problems faced by learners. Additionally, factors such as the mismatch between written and spoken forms, the overwhelming number of words to learn, and the complexity of word knowledge were highlighted as contributing to these difficulties.

Both studies emphasize that knowing a word involves more than simply understanding its dictionary definition. Students must also learn how to pronounce the word, use it in various grammatical contexts, and understand its connotations and idiomatic usage (Adam et al., 2023). The complexity of these tasks, combined with the external and internal challenges identified in this research, make vocabulary learning particularly daunting for students.

In conclusion, this research confirms that eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 5 Natar face significant challenges in learning vocabulary. These challenges are compounded by both personal factors, such as reluctance to use dictionaries and lack of motivation, as well as external factors, including classroom distractions and ineffective vocabulary learning strategies. The findings underscore the need for a more supportive learning environment that fosters motivation,

encourages the use of learning resources like dictionaries, and promotes better classroom management to minimize distractions.

Addressing these issues will require a multifaceted approach that includes more engaging vocabulary lessons, the promotion of independent learning strategies, and the creation of a conducive learning environment. Teachers, too, play a critical role in motivating students and helping them see the relevance of English vocabulary in real-life situations, thereby increasing their motivation to learn and practice. By doing so, students can be empowered to overcome their vocabulary learning difficulties and achieve greater success in mastering English as a foreign language.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that the eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 5 Natar face significant challenges in learning vocabulary, particularly in the areas of pronunciation, grammar, and meaning. These difficulties arise due to several factors, including students' reluctance to use dictionaries, lack of motivation, and difficulty concentrating in class. The study shows that pronunciation is especially problematic due to the discrepancy between how English words are written and how they are pronounced, while grammatical difficulties stem from students' struggles to incorporate vocabulary into sentences. Furthermore, many students had trouble understanding the meanings of words, largely due to limited exposure and the absence of effective vocabulary learning strategies.

These findings align with previous research on vocabulary learning difficulties, highlighting that challenges like pronunciation issues, confusion over word meanings, and grammar complexities are common among students learning English as a foreign language. The factors contributing to these challenges, such as the reluctance to use learning aids and lack of engagement with the material, are also widely recognized in language education research.

This study suggests that vocabulary learning can be improved by fostering a more supportive and engaging classroom environment. Teachers should promote the consistent use of dictionaries and integrate more dynamic teaching strategies that connect vocabulary learning with grammar practice. Additionally, addressing motivational issues by relating vocabulary to real-life situations and encouraging active participation could significantly enhance students' vocabulary acquisition.

Future research could focus on testing interventions designed to tackle these identified challenges, such as integrating technology into vocabulary lessons or implementing peer-assisted learning programs. Moreover, longitudinal studies that track students' vocabulary development over time could offer deeper insights into the long-term effectiveness of various teaching methods.

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