

AN ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN LEARNING VOCABULARY IN GRADE VIII OF SMPN 3 SUNGAI LALA

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to analyze the difficulties faced by eighth-grade students of SMPN 3 Sungai Lala in learning English vocabulary. The research employed a descriptive qualitative approach to obtain a deeper understanding of students' vocabulary learning problems in the classroom. The findings revealed that students experienced various interconnected difficulties, particularly in pronunciation, spelling, grammar, word form, and word usage. Among these aspects, word usage was identified as the most difficult area, followed by word form and pronunciation. The study also found that students' vocabulary difficulties were influenced by limited exposure to English, lack of confidence, and insufficient contextual practice in using vocabulary. These findings indicate that vocabulary learning is a multidimensional process that requires more than simple memorization. Therefore, it is recommended that English teachers implement interactive and communicative teaching strategies that emphasize contextual learning, meaningful language exposure, and active vocabulary practice in order to improve students' vocabulary mastery and classroom participation.

Keywords: *vocabulary learning, students' difficulties, pronunciation, word form, word usage, EFL learners.*

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary mastery plays a crucial role in English language learning because it supports students' ability to communicate effectively in both oral and written forms. Vocabulary is considered the foundation of language skills since learners need sufficient vocabulary knowledge to understand and express ideas in listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities. According to I. S. P. Nation, vocabulary knowledge includes understanding word meaning, form, use, and context. Similarly, Norbert Schmitt states that vocabulary learning involves both receptive and productive knowledge, meaning that learners should not only recognize words but also use them appropriately in communication.

Despite its importance, many junior high school students still experience difficulties in learning English vocabulary. Students often struggle with pronunciation, spelling, grammar, word form, and word usage. These difficulties make it difficult for learners to understand texts, construct sentences, and communicate effectively in English. Pronunciation problems commonly occur because English phonological patterns differ from students' native language, while spelling difficulties are caused by the inconsistency between English sounds and written forms. In addition, students frequently encounter problems in understanding contextual meanings, especially when words have multiple meanings or different grammatical functions.

Another important challenge in vocabulary learning is students' limited understanding of word forms and word usage. Many learners are unable to distinguish grammatical categories such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, which indicates low morphological awareness. Students also tend to misuse vocabulary because they are unfamiliar with collocations and contextual language use. These problems suggest that vocabulary learning is not merely about memorizing words, but also about understanding how words function in real communication.

Based on preliminary observations and interviews conducted at SMPN 3 Sungai Lala, it was found that students tend to have passive vocabulary knowledge and limited opportunities to practice English meaningfully. Students often hesitate to use English because they are afraid of making mistakes, particularly in pronunciation and sentence construction. In addition, classroom learning activities were still less varied, resulting in low student engagement and minimal exposure to authentic language input.

Several previous studies have discussed students' difficulties in vocabulary learning; however, studies focusing on vocabulary difficulties among junior high school students in rural EFL contexts are still limited. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the types of students' difficulties in learning vocabulary at Grade VIII of SMPN 3 Sungai Lala. The findings of this study are expected to provide useful

insights for teachers in developing more effective and interactive vocabulary teaching strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vocabulary Learning

Vocabulary is one of the most essential components in English language learning because it supports students' ability to understand and produce language effectively. According to I. S. P. Nation, vocabulary knowledge includes word meaning, pronunciation, spelling, grammar, and usage in context. Vocabulary mastery also involves receptive and productive knowledge, where learners not only recognize words but are able to use them appropriately in communication. Norbert Schmitt explains that learners with limited vocabulary often experience difficulties in speaking, reading, writing, and listening comprehension.

Students' Difficulties in Pronunciation

Pronunciation is one of the common challenges faced by EFL learners. Students frequently mispronounce English words because English sounds are different from their first language. According to Tracey M. Derwing and Murray J. Munro, learners tend to transfer the phonological patterns of their native language into English pronunciation. In addition, limited exposure to authentic spoken English causes students to rely heavily on written forms rather than auditory input, resulting in inaccurate pronunciation and low speaking confidence.

Students' Difficulties in Spelling

English spelling is often difficult for students because the relationship between pronunciation and written forms is inconsistent. Many students write words based on how they hear them, which leads to spelling errors. Research by Steve Graham and Tanya Santangelo shows that insufficient spelling practice and limited reading habits contribute to students' inability to recognize correct orthographic patterns. As a result, students frequently make mistakes in writing English vocabulary.

Students' Difficulties in Grammar and Word Form

Grammar and word form are closely related to vocabulary mastery. Students often struggle to use words in grammatically correct sentences because they learn vocabulary in isolation without understanding sentence patterns. Furthermore, many learners cannot differentiate between nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. According to Michael J. Kieffer and Nonie K. Lesaux, limited morphological awareness affects students' ability to recognize prefixes, suffixes, and word formation patterns. Consequently, learners face difficulties in expanding and applying vocabulary appropriately.

Students' Difficulties in Word Usage

Word usage becomes another complex problem in vocabulary learning. Students may know the meaning of a word but fail to use it correctly in context. This difficulty is influenced by limited understanding of collocations, multiple meanings, and contextual usage. Norbert Schmitt states that vocabulary learning requires deep semantic understanding and repeated exposure to authentic language use. Without contextual practice, students tend to misuse vocabulary in communication.

RESEARCH METHOD

The formulation of this research focuses on one main question: What are the students' difficulties in learning vocabulary at grade VIII of SMPN 3 Sungai Lala?. This study employs a qualitative descriptive method, allowing an in-depth exploration of students' learning problems in a natural classroom setting.

Research Design

The research used a descriptive qualitative design aimed at identifying and interpreting students' vocabulary learning difficulties without manipulating the instructional environment. The focus was on capturing real classroom phenomena.

Participants

The population of this study consists of all students of Grade VIII at SMPN 3 Sungai Lala in the academic year 2025/2026. There are two classes of Grade VIII with a 27 students in class VIII A and 27 students in class VIII B.

The sample was selected using purposive sampling technique, which means selecting participants who are most relevant to the purpose of the research. The researchers selected 40 students from class VIII of SMPN 3 Sungai Lala.

Data Collection Techniques

To ensure the credibility and richness of the data, this study used **two data collection techniques** namely observation and documentation.

Observation

Observation was conducted during classroom activities to directly examine students' behavior in vocabulary learning. The researcher used an **observation sheet** as a structured instrument to record specific indicators systematically.

The observation focused on several aspects, including:

- a. Students' ability to pronounce vocabulary during class activities
- b. Students' accuracy in spelling words
- c. Students' participation in vocabulary-related tasks
- d. Students' ability to use vocabulary in sentences
- e. Students' responses to teacher instructions

The observation sheet was designed using a checklist format with rating scales to make the data more organized and easier to analyze.

Documentation

Documentation was used to support the data obtained from observations. The documents included English syllabus and lesson plans (RPP) for Grade VIII, students' vocabulary assignments and exercises, students' vocabulary test scores, and photographs of teaching and learning activities. These data helped validate and strengthen the findings.

Research Instruments

Observation

Used to observe students' behavior, participation, and performance during vocabulary learning activities. The observation focuses on the five indicators of vocabulary difficulties: pronunciation, spelling, meaning, word form, and word usage.

Documentation

The researcher collected supporting documents such as students' written works, test results, and photos during observation to strengthen the findings.

Data Analysis Technique

The data were analyzed using an interactive model consisting of three steps:

1. Data Reduction

The researcher selected, focused, and simplified the raw data obtained from observation sheets and documentation.

2. Data Display

The data were organized into descriptive forms such as tables and narrative explanations to make patterns easier to identify.

3. Conclusion Drawing and Verification

The researcher interpreted the data to draw conclusions and verified them by comparing findings from different data sources.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**Findings****Observation Results**

To strengthen the findings, classroom observations were conducted using a structured observation sheet. The results are summarized in the following table:

Table 1. Observation Results of Students' Vocabulary Ability

No.	Indicator	Mean Score	Category
1.	Pronunciation	2.3	Poor
2.	Spelling	2.5	Poor
3.	Grammar	2.4	Poor
4.	Word Form	2.2	Poor
5.	Word Usage	2.1	Poor
6.	Participation	2.8	Fair

The overall findings of this study reveal that students' vocabulary learning difficulties are multidimensional and interconnected, a pattern consistent with Nation's (2013) tripartite framework of vocabulary knowledge encompassing

form, meaning, and use. Rather than occurring in isolation, each difficulty—pronunciation, spelling, grammar, word form, and word usage—interacts with and reinforces the others, confirming that lexical incompetence in one dimension tends to compound weaknesses in another.

Students' Difficulties in Pronunciation

The observation results showed that pronunciation became one of the main difficulties faced by students in learning English vocabulary. During classroom activities, many students pronounced English words incorrectly because they tended to follow the pronunciation patterns of their first language. For example, several students pronounced English words exactly as they were written, indicating interference from their native language phonological system. This finding supports the theory proposed by Tracey M. Derwing and Murray J. Munro, who state that second language learners often transfer the sound system of their mother tongue into the target language.

The data also revealed that students rarely practiced listening to authentic English materials such as conversations, videos, or audio recordings. As a result, students relied more on written forms than spoken input when learning vocabulary. This condition is consistent with Keiko Saito's theory that limited exposure to authentic spoken English hinders learners' pronunciation development. Furthermore, observation data showed that students were hesitant to pronounce words orally because they were afraid of making mistakes. This indicates that low phonological awareness not only affects pronunciation accuracy but also reduces students' confidence in speaking activities.

Students' Difficulties in Spelling

Based on the observation and documentation results, many students experienced difficulties in spelling English vocabulary correctly. Students frequently wrote words according to their pronunciation, which caused spelling inaccuracies. For instance, some students omitted silent letters or confused vowel combinations when writing English words. These findings support the theory of Steve Graham and Tanya Santangelo, who explain that English spelling patterns are inconsistent and often difficult for EFL learners to understand.

The students' written assignments also showed repeated spelling errors in the same vocabulary items, indicating that students had difficulty retaining correct word forms. This problem was influenced by their limited exposure to written English texts and low reading habits. As stated by Stuart Webb and I. S. P. Nation, repeated exposure to written language is important for strengthening vocabulary retention and spelling accuracy. Therefore, the data findings confirm that insufficient reading practice contributed significantly to students' spelling difficulties.

Students' Difficulties in Grammar

The findings revealed that students often experienced difficulties when using vocabulary in grammatically correct sentences. During classroom activities, students were able to identify the meanings of individual words, but they struggled to arrange those words into meaningful sentence structures. Common errors found in students' exercises included incorrect verb forms, inappropriate word order, and incomplete sentence patterns.

These findings are closely related to Norbert Schmitt's theory that vocabulary mastery is not limited to knowing word meanings, but also involves understanding grammatical functions and sentence usage. The observation data indicated that students mostly learned vocabulary through memorization without practicing how the words should be used in context. This supports the argument of Stuart Webb and I. S. P. Nation that vocabulary learning becomes ineffective when learners memorize isolated words without contextual application. As a result, students' vocabulary knowledge remained passive and difficult to apply in communication.

Students' Difficulties in Word Form

The data analysis also showed that students had difficulties distinguishing grammatical categories such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. In students' written tasks, many learners used inappropriate word forms because they did not understand how words change according to their grammatical functions. For example, students frequently used adjectives in places where nouns were required or failed to change verbs into their correct forms.

This finding reflects the theory proposed by Michael J. Kieffer and Nonie K. Lesaux regarding the importance of morphological awareness in vocabulary development. The students' inability to recognize prefixes, suffixes, and word formation patterns indicates limited understanding of English morphology. Consequently, students relied heavily on memorization rather than understanding the relationships among words. This condition also reduced their ability to infer the meanings of unfamiliar vocabulary encountered during classroom learning activities.

Students' Difficulties in Word Usage

Among all aspects of vocabulary learning, word usage appeared to be the most difficult problem faced by students. Observation results showed that students often used vocabulary in inappropriate contexts even though they understood the basic meanings of the words. For example, students tended to use one meaning of a word in all situations without considering contextual differences or collocations.

These findings support Norbert Schmitt's theory that vocabulary mastery requires deep understanding of contextual and pragmatic usage. The findings also align with the study conducted by Ayu Rosyada and Tri Wahyu Apoko, which found that students' limited contextual practice contributes to incorrect vocabulary use. In this study, students had very limited opportunities to practice vocabulary through communicative activities such as discussions or role-play. As a result, students understood vocabulary only at the surface level and frequently misused words in communication.

Discussion

The overall findings indicate that students' vocabulary learning difficulties were interconnected and influenced one another. Based on observation and documentation data, students who had poor pronunciation skills also tended to make spelling mistakes because they wrote words according to incorrect pronunciation patterns. Similarly, students with weak grammatical understanding often misused vocabulary in sentences because they did not understand how words functioned in context.

These findings support I. S. P. Nation's theory that vocabulary knowledge consists of several interconnected dimensions, including pronunciation, spelling, form, meaning, and usage. The findings also revealed that students depended heavily on memorization strategies without sufficient contextual practice. Although memorization helped students remember vocabulary temporarily, it did not support long-term retention or communicative competence. This finding is consistent with the theory of Stuart Webb and I. S. P. Nation that effective vocabulary acquisition requires repeated exposure, contextual learning, and active language use.

From a pedagogical perspective, the field data suggest that vocabulary teaching should be more interactive and communicative. The limited classroom activities observed in this study reduced students' opportunities to practice vocabulary meaningfully. Therefore, activities such as discussions, role-playing, games, and multimedia-based learning are needed to help students use vocabulary in authentic contexts and improve their overall vocabulary mastery.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the difficulties faced by eighth-grade students of SMPN 3 Sungai Lala in learning English vocabulary. Based on the findings and discussion, it can be concluded that students experience multifaceted and interconnected difficulties in vocabulary learning, including pronunciation, spelling, grammar, word form, and word usage.

Pronunciation difficulties were primarily influenced by first language interference and limited exposure to authentic spoken English. Spelling problems were related to the inconsistency between English sounds and written forms, as well as students' limited familiarity with orthographic patterns. In terms of grammar, students showed difficulty integrating vocabulary into correct sentence structures, indicating a gap between lexical knowledge and syntactic competence.

Furthermore, students' confusion in word forms reflected insufficient morphological awareness, which restricted their ability to expand vocabulary effectively. The most complex difficulty was related to word usage, where

students struggled to apply vocabulary appropriately in context, demonstrating shallow vocabulary knowledge.

These difficulties were not isolated but interconnected, suggesting that vocabulary learning involves multiple linguistic dimensions simultaneously. In addition, several contributing factors were identified, including limited exposure to English, low learning motivation, lack of effective learning strategies, and minimal opportunities for practice. Overall, the findings highlight that vocabulary mastery requires not only memorization but also deep understanding and active usage in meaningful contexts.

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