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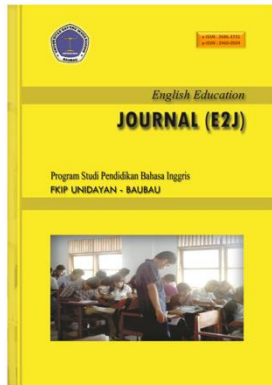
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SECONDARY ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHER'S PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS DIFFICULTIES IN LEARNING VOCABULARY FACED BY INDONESIAN EFL STUDENTS

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Abstract

Many EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students are aware of the importance of having good English language proficiency. Yet, many have not had much success in learning the vocabularies. Vocabularies is one of the most important aspects in learning English. Why do students have difficulties in learning English vocabulary? What efforts do they need to solve the problem in learning English vocabularies? The purpose of this study is to investigate the difficulties that hinder secondary school EFL students from mastering English vocabularies based on secondary English language teachers' perceptions. The respondents of this study are four English subject teachers who teach English at SMP N 1 Buton. The English teachers were chosen as respondents because they had the most insight into their students' performance and the difficulties, they encountered in learning English vocabulary. The questionnaire, which served as the primary research tool, was employed to gather data on the EFL teachers' perceptions regarding the difficulties faced by their secondary EFL students in learning English vocabulary, and what efforts these EFL teachers should make in teaching vocabulary learning effectively to students. The results showed that the main difficulties or problems for students in learning vocabulary were related to students' lack of motivation, limited teaching materials, lack of English exposure, and inadequate learning facilities. Regarding the EFL teacher's efforts in improving students' English vocabulary was done by approaching interactive learning variations using the help of digital learning media that adapts to the development of the current era to improve students English vocabulary. This highlights that students' motivation is the main problems for EFL students,

with teaching material and English exposure also showed other factors that hinders them from mastering English vocabulary. Therefore, it suggests that new teaching and learning strategies should be introduced to address these challenges in English vocabulary learning.

Keywords: EFL, Learning Difficulties, Vocabulary

Abstrak

Banyak siswa EFL (English as a Foreign Language) menyadari pentingnya memiliki kemampuan bahasa Inggris yang baik. Namun, banyak dari mereka yang belum berhasil dalam mempelajari kosakata. Kosakata merupakan salah satu aspek yang paling penting dalam belajar bahasa Inggris. Mengapa siswa kesulitan dalam mempelajari kosakata bahasa Inggris? Upaya apa yang perlu mereka lakukan untuk mengatasi masalah dalam mempelajari kosakata bahasa Inggris? Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk menyelidiki kesulitan-kesulitan yang menghambat siswa EFL di sekolah menengah dalam menguasai kosakata bahasa Inggris berdasarkan persepsi guru bahasa Inggris sekolah menengah. Responden dalam penelitian ini adalah empat guru mata pelajaran bahasa Inggris yang mengajar di SMP N 1 Buton. Para guru bahasa Inggris dipilih sebagai responden karena mereka memiliki wawasan yang paling mendalam mengenai kinerja siswa mereka dan kesulitan yang mereka hadapi dalam mempelajari kosakata bahasa Inggris. Kuesioner yang digunakan sebagai alat penelitian utama digunakan untuk mengumpulkan data mengenai persepsi guru EFL mengenai kesulitan yang dihadapi oleh siswa EFL mereka dalam mempelajari kosakata bahasa Inggris, serta upaya yang harus dilakukan oleh guru EFL dalam mengajarkan pembelajaran kosakata secara efektif kepada siswa. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kesulitan utama yang dihadapi siswa dalam mempelajari kosakata terkait dengan kurangnya motivasi siswa, keterbatasan bahan ajar, kurangnya paparan bahasa Inggris, dan fasilitas pembelajaran yang tidak memadai. Mengenai upaya guru EFL dalam meningkatkan kosakata bahasa Inggris siswa dilakukan dengan pendekatan variasi pembelajaran interaktif menggunakan bantuan media pembelajaran digital yang disesuaikan dengan perkembangan zaman saat ini untuk meningkatkan kosakata bahasa Inggris siswa. Hal ini menunjukkan bahwa motivasi siswa adalah masalah utama bagi siswa EFL, dengan bahan ajar dan paparan bahasa Inggris juga menunjukkan faktor lain yang menghambat mereka dalam menguasai kosakata bahasa Inggris. Oleh karena itu, disarankan bahwa strategi pengajaran dan pembelajaran baru harus diperkenalkan untuk mengatasi tantangan-tantangan ini dalam pembelajaran kosakata bahasa Inggris.

Kata kunci: EFL, Kesulitan Pembelajaran, Kosakata

1. INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is a fundamental aspect of language learning, especially in English, as it supports effective communication and expression in both speaking and writing. Mistar, J. [1] emphasize that vocabulary is one of the key components of English language teaching (ELT). Without sufficient vocabulary, the ability to understand and use the language becomes limited, impacting all language skills: reading, speaking, listening, and writing. Mastering vocabulary is essential for students to grasp meaning in communication and express their ideas clearly. A lack of vocabulary hinders students' ability to understand spoken or written texts and limits their capacity to articulate their thoughts accurately. Moreover, students may recognize words but struggle to use them appropriately in context or pronounce them correctly.

Effective vocabulary teaching is crucial, especially at a young age, as it influences students' speaking skills and comprehension of English texts. Vocabulary development is directly linked to success in learning English, and without it, students will struggle to communicate or achieve learning goals (Arifin & Faridi, [2]). Teachers play a vital role in overcoming vocabulary learning difficulties by implementing strategies that cater to students' needs. Teachers' perceptions of the learning process shape their approaches to teaching, impacting how they help students with vocabulary acquisition. Positive teacher perceptions can lead to more effective planning and teaching, fostering a better learning environment (Hassankiadeh, [3]). At SMP N 1 Buton, vocabulary learning presents challenges, particularly in finding the right teaching methods to improve students' vocabulary. Despite the importance of vocabulary in communication, there is a need for innovative teaching approaches to address the difficulties faced by students in mastering English vocabulary. Therefore, this study aims to explore the perceptions of English teachers regarding the vocabulary learning challenges faced by grade eight students at SMP N 1 Buton.

1.1. Definition of Vocabulary Mastery

Vocabulary mastery refers to a person's ability to understand and use words effectively. Setiyaningsih *et al.* [4] defined it as the capacity to comprehend and utilize a set of words from a foreign language, either individually or in specific contexts. Mastery includes understanding word meanings, creating words, and classifying them. She described it as a strong command of words, where individuals can memorize and use words effectively in conversation. Vu & Peters [5] highlights that vocabulary learning and acquisition are closely linked to language learning overall.

Pradina & Listyani [6] emphasizes that mastering vocabulary is essential in foreign language learning. A well-developed vocabulary enhances abilities in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Strong vocabulary helps readers understand texts more easily and enables speakers to form coherent sentences and comprehend others' ideas. Haryadi *et al.* [7] note that vocabulary mastery is critical in foreign language acquisition, as it significantly impacts language proficiency and facilitates smoother communication.

1.2. Understanding Vocabulary Learning

Vocabulary is a collection of words used in a language. Vocabulary is the set of words used in a language. Keraf [8] emphasizes that vocabulary is essential for developing language skills such as speaking, listening, reading, and writing, all necessary for effective communication. Rahmawati [9] defines it as a set of words with specific meanings that help express ideas and describe things.

Fluency in communication depends on one's vocabulary. However, without proper strategies, learning vocabulary can be difficult, especially when the number of words to master is large and not suited to the student's educational level. Vocabulary learning is crucial for language development, as it directly impacts reading ability and overall academic success. According to Pikulski & Templeton [10], vocabulary learning involves both teaching and acquiring words.

Decarrico [11] proposes key principles for vocabulary learning, such as expanding vocabulary, linking new words to known ones, providing new words, and helping students understand their meanings. Vocabulary learning can be explicit, where words are taught directly, or implicit, through activities

like reading and communication. Andriani & Sriwahyuningsih [12] emphasizes the need for strategies to deduce word meanings from context, as a lack of vocabulary hinders effective communication and understanding of language structure.

1.3. The Principle of Vocabulary

Kieran [13] outlines several principles for acquiring vocabulary, beginning with the selection of useful words—those that students are likely to encounter frequently or need for common language use. Teachers should encourage independent study before lessons, allowing students to take an active role in their learning. It's also important to focus on various aspects of a word, including its meaning, context, grammatical usage, collocations, and word families. Understanding these components can improve vocabulary retention and comprehension.

Providing meaningful learning opportunities, such as using words in real-life tasks like writing or speaking exercises, is essential for reinforcing vocabulary. Regular testing helps monitor students' progress, offering feedback and encouraging repetition, which strengthens memory retention. Additionally, teachers should be patient, recognizing that forgetting words is a natural part of the learning process. A supportive environment, with ample chances for students to learn and review vocabulary, is key to achieving vocabulary mastery.

1.4. The Importance of Vocabulary in Learning English

Vocabulary is crucial in mastering English as it underpins both comprehension and effective communication. A strong vocabulary helps students understand what they read or hear and express themselves clearly. Iftitah *et al.* [14] highlight that a solid vocabulary is key to practicing grammatical structures with ease. Amalia [15] stresses that vocabulary acquisition forms the foundation of language proficiency, making its development essential for language learners.

Dakhi & Fitria [16] identifies several important reasons why vocabulary is vital:

1. Vocabulary as the Basis of Communication: Without vocabulary, communication is impossible. It serves as

the core medium through which we convey thoughts, feelings, and ideas.

2. **Vocabulary as a Reflection of Social Reality:** Vocabulary shapes how we perceive and interact with the world, influencing our thoughts and behavior.
3. **Vocabulary as a Predictor of Academic Ability:** A person's vocabulary size often correlates with their academic success.

Apriliani [17] emphasizes that mastering vocabulary is necessary for success in speaking, reading, writing, and listening. A limited vocabulary can hinder comprehension and communication. Expanding vocabulary is essential for mastering English, as it enables individuals to understand texts, follow instructions, and interact meaningfully. Marpaung & Situmeang [18] also points out that vocabulary expansion is central to learning English, as it enhances communication, comprehension, and overall language proficiency. In essence, vocabulary acquisition is foundational for progress in language learning.

1.5. Factors Affecting Vocabulary Mastery

Vocabulary proficiency varies from person to person and is influenced by various developmental stages. According to Nurhalimah *et al.* [19], vocabulary acquisition is affected by both internal and external factors:

Internal Factors:

1. **Age Level:** Vocabulary learning is more effective when children reach a certain level of cognitive and physical development. Younger children, with stronger memory skills, are more receptive to learning new words, making age-appropriate teaching crucial.
2. **Child's Ability and Self-Confidence:** A child's natural aptitude and self-confidence significantly influence vocabulary learning. Confident children are more likely to actively engage with new words, enhancing their vocabulary acquisition.
3. **Motivation:** Motivation is a key factor in vocabulary learning. High motivation, especially intrinsic motivation driven by personal interests, encourages deeper

engagement with vocabulary and can lead to mastery.

External Factors:

1. **Family Environment:** A child's vocabulary development is influenced by their family environment. Children from higher socio-economic backgrounds typically have more exposure to language, resulting in better vocabulary growth.
2. **School Environment:** The school setting, including teacher attitudes, teaching methods, and available resources, plays a significant role in vocabulary development. A supportive, resource-rich school environment enhances learning, while an inadequate one can hinder progress.

Both internal factors (age, motivation, self-confidence) and external factors (family and school environments) together shape vocabulary development.

1.6. Students' Problem in Learning English Vocabulary

Learning English vocabulary poses challenges for many students, affecting their overall understanding and achievement of learning goals. However, when students are in supportive learning environments, their potential for learning increases (Roinah, [20]). Internal factors impacting learning include personal traits, learning habits, confidence, the ability to process materials, and concentration. External factors involve the curriculum, social environment, infrastructure, and teaching methods.

Darsiana [21] identifies several challenges that hinder English vocabulary learning:

1. **Poor English Proficiency Due to Unfamiliarity:** Many students struggle with vocabulary acquisition because they are not familiar with the English language.
2. **Shyness and Limited Speaking Skills:** Some students hesitate or remain silent when asked to speak in English, limiting their ability to practice and expand their vocabulary.
3. **Difficulty in Speaking English:** A lack of speaking skills prevents students from

effectively communicating, restricting their chances to use and learn new vocabulary.

2. METHODS

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach to examine the challenges of learning English vocabulary at SMP Negeri 1 Buton, with a specific focus on the experiences of first-grade teachers. Descriptive methods were employed to explore and detail the existing conditions based on observable facts, without generalizing the findings (Sugiyono, [22]). This method is designed to uncover facts and provide an accurate interpretation of real-world issues, essential for understanding vocabulary learning challenges in the classroom. The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 1 Buton, located in Pasar Wajo District, Buton Regency, in September, after approval from the supervising lecturer. The subjects of the research were four English teachers, selected purposively for their relevance to the study's objectives, and they provided insights into the challenges of teaching English vocabulary and the methods they use.

The data collection methods included observations, interviews, and document studies. Observations were conducted through participatory engagement with teachers during classroom activities, capturing real-time interactions that influenced vocabulary learning (Widoyoko, [23]). Face-to-face interviews were conducted with the teachers using open-ended questions, following the 5W+1H framework to gather in-depth insights into the teachers' perspectives on vocabulary learning challenges (Mackey & Gass, [24]). Additionally, document studies were used to analyze teaching materials, lesson plans, and other relevant documents that could provide further context. The data analysis followed a systematic process with three key stages: data collection, data reduction (organizing the data and focusing on key themes), and data display (presenting the findings in a narrative format).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Results

This section presents the findings from interviews with English teachers at SMP N 1 Buton regarding the challenges they face in teaching English vocabulary. The results

highlight several key issues, including lack of motivation, limited vocabulary, pronunciation difficulties, insufficient learning support facilities, and inadequate teaching materials. The following sections detail each issue based on the teachers' perspectives.

Teachers' Perspectives on Vocabulary Learning Problems

The findings from the interviews reveal several key challenges that teachers face when teaching English vocabulary, which are explored below.

Lack of Motivation

One of the major issues identified by the teachers is the lack of motivation among students. Both teachers expressed that eighth-grade students, as they transition from grade seven, often show a lack of interest in English. This lack of motivation is compounded by their limited vocabulary and the perception that learning English is difficult. Teacher A shared:

"Eighth grade students are transitioning from seventh grade, so sometimes some students still lack motivation and interest in learning English because they focus more on subjects they like compared to English, which they think is difficult. This is also influenced by their lack of vocabulary." (Teacher A)

Teacher C also mentioned that students' interest significantly influences their engagement in English lessons:

"Eighth grade students depend on their interest. If they like English, especially those who have attended courses, they will focus in class when I ask. But for students who are less interested or who have never attended English courses, they tend to chat a lot with friends or mostly remain silent." (Teacher c)

These findings suggest that student motivation is a critical factor in vocabulary development, as those who lack interest often struggle to engage with and retain new words.

Limited Vocabulary and Pronunciation Problems

A direct consequence of the lack of motivation is the limited vocabulary among students. Teachers observed that many students struggle

to grasp new words, which significantly impacts their ability to comprehend lessons and communicate effectively. This limited vocabulary, combined with pronunciation difficulties, further complicates students' learning experience.

Teacher B emphasized that vocabulary is essential for understanding and producing language:

"Students' lack of vocabulary hinders their ability to understand spoken or written texts and limits their capacity to articulate their thoughts accurately." (Teacher B)

The issue of pronunciation is closely related, as students' limited vocabulary prevents them from practicing words in context, which is essential for improving pronunciation. Pronunciation issues, such as mispronouncing words, further exacerbate students' difficulties in communication.

Teacher B also pointed out the challenges of pronunciation, especially in the context of regional dialects and the influence of the mother tongue. Mispronunciations can lead to confusion and frustration, further discouraging students from participating in oral activities. This reluctance reduces their opportunities to practice and improve their speaking skills.

Insufficient Learning Support Facilities and Teaching Materials

Another significant issue identified by the teachers was the lack of adequate teaching materials and learning support facilities. Both Teacher A and Teacher D indicated that the resources available for vocabulary instruction were insufficient, which affected the quality of lessons and students' vocabulary acquisition.

Teacher D noted:

"Inadequate materials and monotonous teaching methods cause students to lose interest. When students are not motivated, their vocabulary development suffers." (Teacher D)

The lack of interactive and engaging resources made it difficult for teachers to keep students engaged in vocabulary lessons. This lack of variety and innovation in teaching methods

contributed to students' overall lack of progress in mastering English vocabulary.

Teaching Materials

The teachers also reported difficulties in adapting to the new curriculum and teaching materials, which hindered their ability to effectively deliver lessons.

Teacher B shared:

"The current curriculum in my personal opinion is quite difficult for me to implement because the teaching materials, in this case the book, are different from the previous teaching materials. This makes it a bit difficult for me to teach English to students. But I continue to learn to adjust to existing books and improvise with additional digital teaching materials." (Teacher B)

The shift in curriculum and teaching materials has posed challenges for teachers, as they are required to adjust their teaching methods to align with new materials. This transition has led to frustration among teachers, who feel ill-prepared and unsupported in adapting to the new teaching content. Without adequate teaching resources, teachers are unable to deliver lessons as effectively, which negatively impacts student learning.

Teacher C further stressed the importance of facilities:

"Schools must have facilities that support the learning process. For example, the library must have the necessary stock of reference books, because the material taught by the teacher depends on the books available. The school must also have adequate access to teaching materials, such as teaching aids, and digital learning media." (Teacher C).

3.2. Discussion

The study highlights several challenges faced by teachers at SMP N 1 Buton in teaching English vocabulary, which align with existing research in language learning.

Teachers identified lack of motivation, particularly among eighth-grade students, as a major issue. Disinterest in English hampers vocabulary development, as students are less engaged and struggle to retain new words. Nurgiyantoro [25] stresses that motivation is crucial for vocabulary retention, while

Rahmawati [9] links strong vocabulary to improved speaking skills. Thus, motivating students with engaging lessons is essential. The limited vocabulary of students also affects both comprehension and communication, as noted by Teacher B. This aligns with Nurgiyantoro's [25] view that vocabulary is key to language proficiency. Additionally, pronunciation problems, influenced by regional dialects and the mother tongue, further hinder communication. Zulfitri & Nurlaili [26] emphasize how pronunciation issues can complicate language learning. Addressing both vocabulary and pronunciation in context can improve retention and accuracy.

Moreover, teachers reported a lack of resources and inadequate teaching materials as significant barriers to effective vocabulary teaching. Azhar Arsyad [27] underscores the importance of adequate resources in enhancing educational quality. Without modern textbooks or digital tools, teaching is less dynamic and engaging. Using multimedia resources can bridge this gap and make vocabulary learning more accessible.

Lastly, where teachers alternate between languages, can help students better understand complex vocabulary. Wardhaugh [28] notes that this strategy aids comprehension and retention by providing immediate clarification. This approach can be particularly beneficial for students struggling with new words or pronunciation.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, improving vocabulary learning at SMP N 1 Buton requires addressing both the lack of motivation and the limitations of resources. Teachers need to create engaging and interactive lessons while utilizing various teaching methods and digital tools to support vocabulary learning. Additionally, teachers should continue to innovate and adapt their teaching approaches to better meet the needs of their students. With the right strategies and support, students' vocabulary acquisition and language skills can significantly improve.

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