VOCABULARY MASTERY CHALLENGES AMONG INDONESIAN PUBLIC JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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INFO ARTIKEL	ABSTRAK
	Penguasaan kosakata sangat penting dalam pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris sebagai Bahasa Asing (EFL); namun, banyak siswa SMP negeri di Indonesia masih mengalami kelemahan kosakata yang signifikan. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk mengkaji kurangnya penguasaan kosakata di kalangan siswa kelas VII dan VIII di sebuah SMP negeri di Indonesia, serta untuk mengidentifikasi penyebab mendasar dari masalah ini. Data untuk 96 siswa diperoleh menggunakan teknik deskriptif kualitatif, termasuk observasi kelas, wawancara siswa, dan laporan guru. Berdasarkan temuan, siswa menunjukkan pengenalan kosakata yang tidak memadai, daya ingat yang buruk, dan kemampuan yang rendah dalam menggunakan kata secara efektif dalam konteks. Siswa kelas tujuh mengalami kesulitan dalam mengingat kata dasar dan menunjukkan tingkat ketakutan dan ketidakmauan yang signifikan untuk berbicara, sedangkan siswa kelas delapan mengalami kesulitan dalam pengucapan, bentuk kata gramatikal, dan penggunaan kosakata yang tidak konsisten. Pendekatan pengajaran tradisional yang menekankan hafalan tanpa paparan konteks yang memadai ditemukan sebagai kontributor utama terhadap perkembangan kosakata yang terbatas pada anak-anak. Temuan penelitian juga menunjukkan bahwa kurangnya masukan bahasa yang relevan dan keterbatasan kesempatan untuk menggunakan kosakata secara aktif berdampak negatif terhadap kepercayaan diri dan keterampilan komunikasi siswa. Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa peningkatan penguasaan kosakata memerlukan strategi pengajaran yang menekankan pembelajaran kontekstual, paparan rutin, dan partisipasi aktif dengan istilah-istilah berfrekuensi tinggi. Temuan ini memiliki implikasi pedagogis bagi guru bahasa Inggris dan pembuat kebijakan di sekolah menengah pertama Indonesia, membantu meningkatkan pelatihan kosakata dan mempromosikan perkembangan bahasa jangka panjang.
	ABSTRACT
	Vocabulary mastering is essential in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning; however, many Indonesian public junior high school pupils continue to have major lexical weaknesses. The purpose of this study is to look into the lack of vocabulary mastery among seventh- and eighth-grade students at a public junior high school in Indonesia, as well as to discover the underlying causes of this problem. Data for 96 students were acquired using a qualitative descriptive technique, including classroom observations, student interviews, and teacher reports. According to the findings, students displayed inadequate vocabulary recognition, poor retention, and a low ability to utilise words effectively in context. Seventh-grade students had difficulty with basic word memory and expressed significant levels of fear and unwillingness to speak, whereas eighth-grade students struggled with pronunciation, grammatical word forms, and

inconsistent vocabulary use. Traditional teaching approaches that emphasise rote memorisation without adequate contextual exposure were found as a primary contributor to children' restricted vocabulary development. The findings also show that a lack of relevant language input and limited possibilities for active vocabulary use had a negative impact on students' confidence and communicative skills. This study finds that enhancing vocabulary mastery necessitates instructional strategies that emphasise contextualised learning, regular exposure, and active participation with high-frequency terms. The findings have pedagogical implications for English teachers and policymakers in Indonesian junior high schools, helping to improve vocabulary training and promote long-term language development.

1. Introduction

Vocabulary mastery plays a central role in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, as it underpins learners' ability to comprehend texts, express ideas, and participate meaningfully in communication. For junior high school students, especially in EFL contexts such as Indonesia, vocabulary knowledge is not only essential for language proficiency but also closely linked to academic achievement and classroom engagement. Without adequate vocabulary mastery, students often struggle to understand instructional materials, produce spoken or written language, and develop confidence in using English.

Recent perspectives on vocabulary learning emphasise that vocabulary knowledge involves more than memorising word lists. It includes both vocabulary size and vocabulary depth, such as understanding pronunciation, grammatical forms, meanings, and contextual usage. Learners are expected to move beyond passive recognition of words toward active and accurate use in real communicative situations. However, many Indonesian public junior high school students still experience persistent difficulties in achieving this level of mastery. Limited exposure to meaningful input, insufficient opportunities for practice, and teaching methods that rely heavily on rote memorisation often hinder effective vocabulary development.

Previous studies have reported that inadequate vocabulary mastery negatively affects students' speaking confidence, participation, and overall communicative competence. Despite these findings, vocabulary instruction in many public junior high schools remains focused on repetition and translation, with minimal contextualisation or learner engagement. This condition highlights a clear gap between theoretical recommendations for vocabulary teaching and actual classroom practices.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the lack of vocabulary mastery among seventh- and eighth-grade students in a public junior high school in Indonesia and to identify the underlying factors contributing to this problem. By exploring students' experiences and classroom practices, this research seeks to provide pedagogically

relevant insights to support more effective vocabulary instruction in Indonesian EFL contexts.

2. Method

This study used a qualitative descriptive research approach to investigate the lack of vocabulary mastery among seventh- and eighth-grade students in an Indonesian public junior high school. A qualitative descriptive technique was chosen because it allows for an in-depth evaluation of students' vocabulary learning challenges as they arise naturally in the classroom setting, without influencing variables.

The participants included 96 kids, including 32 seventh-graders and 64 eighth-graders from two courses, as well as English teachers who contributed additional information. Data were gathered through classroom observations, semi-structured student interviews, and instructor reports. Classroom observations concentrated on students' vocabulary recognition, usage, pronunciation, and engagement in English learning activities. Student interviews were undertaken to learn about students' perspectives, challenges, and attitudes towards vocabulary learning, while instructor reports and field notes were used to supplement observational and interview data.

The data were analysed using a thematic qualitative procedure. All observation notes, interview transcripts, and teacher reports were thoroughly evaluated, transcribed, and categorised to find recurring trends in vocabulary recognition, retention, contextual use, and learning challenges. Data triangulation was used to increase the reliability of the findings by comparing information from several sources. The findings were then interpreted descriptively to provide a thorough knowledge of the factors influencing pupils' limited vocabulary mastery.

3. Result and Discussion

This study used classroom observation, student interviews, and teacher reports to assess vocabulary competence among 96 students (32 seventh-graders and 64 eighth-graders divided into classes 8-1 and 8-2) in a public junior high school in Indonesia. The qualitative data suggests continuing deficiencies in word recognition, retention, and productive use at both grade levels, with significant disparities between cohorts.

Overall, students showed little active vocabulary use: throughout speaking exercises, most students either produced Indonesian equivalents or remained mute. When faced with novel English terminology, over 85% of seventh-graders and 78% of eighth-graders used L1 translation or non-response. Interview data revealed two recurring student reports: a frequent inability to recall newly learnt words after a short interval ("I forget words after one day") and confusion caused by phonological or form-related differences between English and Indonesian ("English words sound like Indonesian but mean different"). Teacher logs supported these findings, indicating that recall for concrete, high-frequency nouns was slightly higher than for abstract or morphologically difficult items.

7th Grade Vocabulary Deficits

Observations of the 7th grade cohort (n=32) revealed that students identified less than 20% of targeted vocabulary (e.g., daily routine words like "wake up," "brush teeth")

during matching activities. Interviews revealed a fear of making mistakes: 22 pupils acknowledged to skipping English to avoid "shame in front of their friends." Teacher anecdotes indicated reliance on memorisation without context, resulting in rapid forgetfulness, as one pupil observed, "Teacher says repeat 10 times, but tomorrow gone."

These deficiencies are due to insufficient input exposure, which mirrors national trends in which junior high students attain just 72% mastery of the first 1,000 high-frequency terms. Experts such as Nation (2001) emphasise that incidental learning necessitates 95% comprehension of texts; nevertheless, Indonesian curricula overburden with decontextualised lists, encouraging inactivity. According to Reskiawan et al. (2020), "limited vocabulary and lack of self-confidence create a cycle of avoidance," as evidenced by the hesitation of seventh-grade students. In comparison, this group's challenges outweigh those in targeted therapies such as Wordwall.net, where pre-test scores were 23% higher than KKM (70). Addressing this necessitates contextual techniques; for example, Bahang et al. warn that without enjoyable media, "lack of exposure hampers all skills." Longitudinal tracking could show whether early discrepancies increase by 8th grade.

8th Grade Vocabulary Challenges

A qualitative data from 8th grade classrooms (8-1: n=32; 8-2: n=32) revealed nuanced splits: class 8-1 averaged 35% success in descriptive tasks (e.g., utilising adjectives like "big," "beautiful"), according to observation rubrics, whereas 8-2 lagged at 28% due to pronunciation obstacles. Interviews with 8-1 kids produced remarks such as "I know 'eat' but not 'ate' or 'eating'," indicating form confusion; 8-2 students claimed laziness: "No dictionary at home, too hard." According to teacher reports, traditional methods (rote memorisation) resulted in low retention, with only 6/30 students exceeding KKM baselines.

Classroom passivity is consistent with data from SMP Negeri 7 Pematangsiantar, where "traditional teaching lets students only memorise," resulting in poor expression. Vocabulary size falls short of curriculum goals: juniors are meant to have 2,000 words, but actual coverage is 54% for the second 1,000 band. Safura and Helmanda (2022) suggest that "lack of vocabulary underlies all skill deficits," which is exacerbated by L1 interference (Indonesian-English mismatches). Inter-class variance reveals environmental influences; 8-2's lower performance may be due to a lack of exposure, according to Tarakan's productive skill research. Expert Schmitt (2000) claims that methods such as "determination and memory" are underutilised, which explains laziness reports.

Split-class data promotes personalised interventions: keyword approaches for 8-1, questioning for 8-2, as recommended by Hersalina (2021) to combat "fear of mistakes." The nation's 98% production threshold emphasises the importance of focussing on high frequency.

National studies reveal junior high students underperform: SMP Negeri 7 Pematangsiantar in 8th graders have "significant obstacles in productive skills due to limited vocabulary." Azhra (2024) blames problems on "pronunciation, spelling, and L1 differences" and advocates media integration. Aristya's (n.d.) questioning approaches

improve recollection and offer hybrid models for Indonesian educators. Future study should use pre/post assessments to quantify comprehension, including 3,000-word benchmarks.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis

Aspect	7th Grade (n=32)	8th Grade (8-1 class, n=32)	8th Grade (8-2 class, n=32)
Observation	20% concrete nouns	35% adjectives	28% verbs
Interviews	Forgetting, shyness	Form confusion	Pronunciation, no practice
Participation Level	15% active speakers	25% contextual use	18% due to laziness
Teacher-Note Strategy Gap	Rote-only	Partial context	Minimal input

Vocabulary Importance in EFL Learning

Vocabulary mastery is a fundamental component of language proficiency and strongly predicts learners' overall communicative competence (Hulstijn, 2020; Quinn et al., 2020; Webb & Nation, 2021). Wilkins' well-known assertion that vocabulary is central to communication continues to be supported by recent empirical studies emphasizing lexical knowledge over grammatical accuracy alone (Boers, 2021; Laufer & Aviad-Levitzky, 2021).

Vocabulary Problems among Indonesian Junior High School Students

Several studies have reported that Indonesian junior high school students experience limited vocabulary size and difficulty using words appropriately in context (Nurweni & Read, 2020; Reskiawan et al., 2020; Zulfikar & Putri, 2021). Students' lack of vocabulary mastery has been shown to negatively affect speaking confidence and classroom participation (Safura & Helmanda, 2022; Zuraida, 2024).

Causes of Vocabulary Learning Difficulties

Traditional teaching methods that emphasize rote memorization without contextual exposure contribute significantly to low vocabulary retention among EFL learners (Yuliana, 2022; Kartika & Lestari, 2023). Limited exposure to meaningful input and insufficient practice opportunities further hinder vocabulary acquisition in secondary education contexts (Bruton, 2020; Tarigan & Siregar, 2023).

Vocabulary Depth, Retention, and Usage

Vocabulary knowledge involves not only word quantity but also depth, including pronunciation, grammatical form, and contextual usage (Quinn et al., 2020; Zhang, 2020). Learners often struggle to retain newly learned vocabulary when instruction does not encourage repeated and contextualized use (Sun et al., 2020; Nguyen & Boers, 2021).

Pedagogical Implications

Research suggests that contextualized instruction, technology-assisted learning, and active engagement strategies significantly improve vocabulary mastery (Dizon, 2020; Li & Hafner, 2022; Zuo & Wang, 2022). Integrating interactive media and communicative tasks has been shown to increase learner motivation and confidence in vocabulary use (Bahang et al., 2021; Azhra, 2024).

4. Conclusion

The study shows that seventh- and eighth-grade students in the Indonesian junior high school sample have a widespread lack of language proficiency. While eighth-graders continue to exhibit deficiencies in pronunciation, grammatical forms, and consistent use of vocabulary in context, seventh-graders primarily struggle with fundamental word recall and affective obstacles to speaking. The primary contributors traditional rote-based learning, limited contextual exposure, and restricted opportunities for active, repetitive use are open to pedagogical modification. To improve outcomes, teachers and policymakers should focus on contextualised vocabulary training, systematic spaced retrieval, and increased exposure to meaningful English input through classroom materials and technology. Finally, future research should incorporate quantitative pre/post assessments, larger and more varied sample sizes, and longitudinal tracking to see if changes persist over time.

Acknowledgement

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