

STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN VOCABULARY MASTERY

Anissa'ul Afidah, Moch. Imam Machfudi

State Islamic University Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Jember^{1,2}

e-mail: anissaulafidah@gmail.com¹ imam.machfudi@gmail.com²

ABSTRACT

ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Accepted: March 2022

Approved: May 2022

Published: June 2022

Key Words:

*vocabulary
mastery, students'
difficultie, EFL*

The purposes of this study were to describe the students' difficulties in vocabulary mastery and the factors that caused students' difficulties in mastering vocabulary. This research employed qualitative approach using phenomenology design. The data were gathered by observation, interview, and document review. Data technique and data source triangulation were used to validate the collated data. The result of this research revealed that several students had difficulties in vocabulary mastery. This study showed that: first, the difficulties encountered by students were that the students got difficulties in translating words or sentences in English into Indonesian and vice versa. Students also experienced difficulties in understanding the meaning of words, pronunciation, misspelling, and remembering or memorizing English vocabulary. Secondly, there were some factors that caused students got difficulties in vocabulary mastery. Students were reluctant to open dictionaries and less interested in learning English. This condition became the hindrance for them to practice English regularly. The other issues were external factors such as inadequate facilities and the negative influence of friends that at the end have made them difficult to learn English especially vocabulary mastery.

INTRODUCTION

Harmer (2007, p. 102) stated that in English language learning, “students are not only expected to master the four language skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing but also to master the components such as English grammar, collocation and vocabulary.” Vocabulary is one of linguistic components in learning English. Before students study the English skill, they should learn vocabulary as the first step. In a particular context such as for learning English at secondary level, it is used to link the four language skills.

Vocabulary related to four skills of English, namely writing, reading, speaking, and listening. Vocabulary will be very useful in conveying ideas. When reading a simple text in English, if the mastery of vocabulary of the students are good, it will be easy for students to grasp the information or the content of the text. When speaking and listening, if the vocabulary of students are good, then the students can use their ability to communicate directly with other students who also use the English. This is to show that the vocabulary is a foundation in learning English and is very important in learning a language.

To some points, students will definitely be familiar with vocabulary because the biggest component of any language course is vocabulary. McCarthy (1990, p.3) state that: “it does not matter how well the student learn grammar and it does not matter how successfully the sound of L2 are mastered, without words to express a wide range of meanings, communication in an L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way.” And thus, vocabulary should be mastered well by the students in order to support their ability in doing communication, orally or in written form. When students improve their vocabulary, they can communicate with others in English. It makes students easier to express themselves because they feel more confident to participate in the classroom (Machfudi, 2017).

Vocabulary is one of the linguistic components to master when students learn English as a foreign language. In so far, students have ability in understanding and using the words and as well as the meanings. This means that when learning English well, the students do not only know the words, but also their meaning. Literature showed that students can learn English more easily and understand the

meaning of those words. For example, Rivers as cited in Nunan (1991, p.117) confirmed that “vocabulary is essential for successful second language use, because without sufficient vocabulary, people cannot communicate and express their feeling in form of spoken and written effectively.” Therefore, vocabulary is pivotal element in language learning that have to be mastered by students at any level of education.

In fact, the effort for learning vocabulary at secondary level or secondary school have been found to be one of the biggest challenges. Some studies found that many students have graduated from the school with minimum ability in using English. A study by Salam and Nurnisa (2021) claimed that the factor is the lack of vocabulary. The result of their study showed that students experienced difficulties in vocabulary namely pronouncing, spelling, memorizing long syllable and understanding the meaning of words.

A study by Aristya (2018), by interviewing the students at secondary junior high school in the district of Madiun, East Java, the result said that the students got difficulties in vocabulary mastery. There were students experienced difficulties, for example, to remember vocabulary of some verbs. They felt hard to understand vocabulary in sentence structure. Some students also got difficulty in understanding the meaning of words. Other students said that they had difficulty in writing or pronouncing English words. It seemed that every student had different difficulties in vocabulary mastery.

A study by Surmanov and Azimova (2020) found that vocabulary acquisition and retention was considered as the most influential factor in language learning. This study focused on examining the type of difficulties of five school pupils facing in vocabulary learning. The research result revealed that problems or difficulties faced by the students in learning vocabulary were various. The difficulties that students face were almost all students who found it difficult to pronounce words, the different grammatical form of the word, known as exaggerations, was one of the reasons for the students' difficulty in learning vocabulary.

Another study by Salawazo et.al (2020) entitled “An Analysis of Students Vocabulary in Learning Vocabulary.” This study analyzed students' vocabulary in learning English at SMP Swasta Yayasan Pangeran Antasari, Medan in the academic year of 2018/2019. The result revealed that difficulties of students' vocabulary in learning

English were the difficulties in pronouncing the words by the students. Grammatical forms have been the other cause of difficulty in which students were difficult to identify the written and spoken forms because they are different in the English system. The other result showed that the students were easily forgot the vocabulary they have just learned. This happened when most students did not pay attention to study English seriously or due to the limited time for learning.

Research to analyze students' difficulties in learning English especially learning vocabulary is very important. Some studies have proven that by knowing the students' difficulties can help teachers find solution for the problems faced by students in the process of mastering vocabulary. This present research was interested to carry out an analysis dealing with similar topic but different focus. This research was focusing on aspects and examples from classroom practices and to examine the cause of students' difficulties in vocabulary mastery.

The primary aim of this study is to examine the students' difficulties in vocabulary mastery. The objectives of this study were to (1) describe the difficulties encountered by eleventh grade students in vocabulary mastery, (2) to examine the factors that caused students' difficulties in vocabulary mastery. Practically, the findings of this study could become reference for future researchers who conduct a research at similar topic and this research could be scientific contribution to the development of English learning, especially in vocabulary mastery.

This research has been intended to analyze and describe the difficulties encountered by students and the phenomena that existed in the classroom practices of a vocational high school so far. The research site was a vocational high school in Jember namely SMK Ainul Yaqin Ajung in the district of Jember. This school was selected based on preliminary observations done prior to collecting the data by researchers. This school also showed potential to be good place for students to learn English as well as Islamic related subjects because the site is close to the state Islamic University of KH Achmad Siddiq Jember.

METHOD

This research employed a qualitative research method. According to Creswell (2007, 2012), a qualitative research begins with the assumptions a worldview the possible use a theoretical lens, and the

study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or group ascribe to a social or human problem. Meanwhile Bogdan and Biklen (1998) assigned that qualitative researchers “try to interact with their subjects in a natural, unobtrusive, and nonthreatening manner” (p.35). This study has chosen a qualitative research approach since the natural setting was possible to explain the effort to gain the meaning of individual activity done by the students or participants of this research.

This research used phenomenology approach to learn from the experiences of the English teacher and the students. In a phenomenology study the attempt to understand meaning of events have been the concern of researchers (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Thus, the researchers described the meaning for several individuals of their experiences of a concept or a phenomenon. In this study, experiences of the English teachers and the students under study were analyzed to portray what might be best to capture the difficulties or feelings of anxieties of the students when they learn English.

The data collection techniques used in this research were interview, observation and document review. These techniques were the effective and efficient ways to understand the phenomena that existed and the factors that might influenced students' difficulties in vocabulary mastery. The subjects of this research were chosen purposively by interviewing teachers, students, and kyai (the leader of the school founder). The subjects of this study were also selected based on the considerations of the possibilities of those who understood the research problems.

Data analysis methods were using Miles, Huberman and Saldana's (2014) theory of qualitative data analysis. There are four steps in analyzing the data that have been collected including data collection, data condensation, data display and verification or conclusion drawing. The collated data from the interviews and classroom observations were then categorized by using systematic coding. In the condensation process, the data were selected to be the most important ones which can be utilized to answer the research questions. Then in process of data verification, the process for meaning making and interpreting the data were the most important process because this process will lead to drawing conclusion where new findings for this study will provide new theory or novelty of this research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION/ نتائج البحث ومناقشاتها

During and after collecting the data in the field using various techniques, the results of this research are as follow:

1. Students' difficulties in vocabulary mastery

From the result of obtained data, it was found that student have several difficulties in vocabulary mastery. First, students got difficulties in translating words. It was caused by confusion to grasp the meaning or Indonesian translation for an English word because a word in English has several meanings. For example, a student got confused when faced a text because sometimes the meaning is not accordance with the basic meaning of the word. It was explained by student 4 and translated by researchers as follows:

"I have difficulty in translating English into Indonesian or Indonesian into English. When the teacher gave me exercise, it was hard to translate the questions into Indonesia. Sometimes my teacher also asked me to translate Indonesia into English. I felt confused because in English words sometimes have several meanings. Sometimes the meaning that I knew did not match with the question." (Student 4, interview, Jember, 22nd November 2021)

In line with the statement above, Thornbury (2002) said that when two words overlap in meaning, learners are likely to confuse them. In addition students have to translate the meaning of words, students also have to know the meaning of the sentence as a whole. The experience by students under study showed that they have tried to master the word meaning in Bahasa Indonesia but when the teacher asked them to say the word again they have already forgot.

Second, students got difficulty in pronunciation. They were confused to pronounce English words because typically English has different writing and pronouncing system. A word can sound differently with the writing, unlike in Bahasa Indonesia, what you pronounce is what you look at writing or text. For a new English learner, she/he must get confused when they should pronounce differently. This experience was explained by student 1 (translated by researchers) as follows:

"It is difficult in pronunciation, because in daily, I do not listen the native English conversation also the pronunciation of English and

Indonesian is different, so it is difficult to pronounce" (Student 1, interview, Jember, 22nd November 2021)

The students made some mistakes when pronouncing the vowel (a,i,,u,e,o) in English words such as 'hours, high, idea'. Many of them are reading with Indonesian pronunciation. For example, the word 'hour' which should be pronounced /'ou(ə)r/ with silent /h/, the students pronounced it with strong /h-hower/. They also confused with the pronunciation of "our". The other mistake is when students pronounce the silent letter like 'write, listen, know, etc'. They pronounce the English words like what they see in the text. This pronunciation problem seemed to be typical to any learner in this level.

Based on the results of observations, when students were appointed by the teacher to read a text in front of the class one by one. Many students mispronounced the word 'hours, high, idea, etc'. At that occasion many of them were reading with Indonesian pronunciation system. The other mistake was when students pronounce the silent letter like 'write, listen, know, etc'. They pronounce the English words as though they read the writing of Indonesian words i.e. the Indonesian sound system is "what you pronounce is what you see in the writing." (Observation, November 27th 2021)

The finding about mispronounce the silent letter words was in line with the study by Salawazo et.al. (2020: pp.469-475). They reported that one of the difficulties in learning vocabulary was pronunciation. The differences between spoken and written in English was become the factor of difficulties of students to learning vocabulary. For example, when the students faced the words such as muscle, listen, write, honestly, judge, science. Some words that contain silent letters are problematic especially for Indonesia students

Third, students misspelt words. This was the activity that mostly happened because of the students still confused themselves on distinguishing between Indonesian and English alphabet. It was explained by student 3 as follow (translated into English by the researchers):

"When the teacher gave tasks to spell words, I got difficulty to spell them because I was still confused to distinguish between Indonesian and English alphabet." (Student 3, interview, Jember, 22nd November 2021)

Student experienced difficulty when teacher gave spelling quiz. In this quiz, the teacher said the word and the student wrote based on

what they heard. The result showed that some students have made mistake to choose the letter like (rid for read, shell for shall). In line with the problem above, wrong spelling happened when students have mistakenly made error as the result of the wrong choice of letter, the omission of letters and wrong order of letter (Thornbury, 2002).

The other problem was that the students had difficulty in remembering vocabulary. As Thornbury (2002) confirmed that to achieve learning vocabulary, students need not only to learn a lot of words, but also to remember them because learning is about remembering. It means that if the students want to master vocabulary, students not only learn the words but they have to memorize it. During the process of learning English, the students of SMK Ainul Yaqin Ajung Jember were not able to remember a lot of vocabulary in a long time. When they tried to remember new vocabulary, they forgot the vocabulary that they remembered before. One of the factor was they did not do repetition. They just learnt at school and they did not practice at home or boarding house (pesantren). This was told by student 5 as follows (translated into English by the researchers)

"I find difficulties in remembering or memorizing vocabulary in English because I rarely repeat the words or sentence that I had already learned previously" (Student 5, interview, Jember, 22nd November 2021)

The above interview result has supported theory by Thornbury (2002) who stated that the time-honoured way of 'memorising' new material is through repeated rehearsal of the material. Repetition was also good and effective way when students wanted to master other lesson not necessarily vocabulary. Even in a pesantren which focus is on memorizing Al Qur'an the students should read the Quranic verses repeatedly, hence the repetition activity is important.

2. Factors of difficulties in vocabulary mastery

The first factor was students reluctant to open the dictionaries. According to Harmer (2007) dictionaries are generally used when students have already read through a word and then look it up to check that they know how to use it. In fact, students tend to ask directly to the teacher rather than look up the meaning in the dictionary first. One of the factors that causes students were reluctant to open dictionaries. However, it was also found that some students did not have dictionaries. They only used the dictionary provided by

the school and the dictionary was not enough for one class. It was explained by student as follow (English translation done by the researcher)

"One of the factors that make me difficult to master vocabulary is I rarely use a dictionary, there are many words that I do not know or not familiar with." (Student 1, interview, Jember, 22nd November 2021)

The other student has said:

"Some of the factors that make me difficult to master vocabulary maybe because I did not have an English dictionary. I also rarely memorized vocabulary when I was at home." (Student 7, interview, Jember, 23rd November 2021)

Students who are reluctant to open dictionaries will make them difficult to understand words or sentence in a text, seeing that one word in English has a different meaning when confirmed with different context. This finding was in line with study by Rohmatillah (2016) entitled "Dictionary Usage in English Language Learning". His study showed that the students who were reluctant to find out the meaning of word from dictionary, they tended to misunderstand words as a result of the meaning of a word is not based on the context of the sentence.

The second factor was students were less interested in learning vocabulary. The students were less interested because they did not have motivation in learning English. Harmer (2007) stated that "motivation itself is some kind of internal drive which pushes someone to do things in order to achieve something" (p.28). When learning English, students pay less attention to the material taught by the teacher, students lose interested in learning English. The students tended to be passive. They were lazy and felt bored during English lesson. They did not actively involved in the class, asking or answering questions, as it was explained by student 1 as follow (translation has made by the researchers)

"The other factor that made me difficult in mastering vocabulary was less motivation in learning English. I was bored and lazy in learning English." (Student 1, interview, Jember, 22nd November 2021)

In line with the statement above, Slameto (2010) said the factors that cause learning difficulties were from within students are lack of attention, lack of interest, emotion, talent, etc. The motivated

learners will find themselves much easier to learn English vocabulary. Moreover when the facilities they possessed support their learning process. This is to show that when students are highly motivated they will learn English better.

The third factor was students did not practice speaking English regularly. It happened because students did not know what they have to speak or material to learn. When students speaking English they were being worried of making mistake and being nervous. It was told by student 2 as follow (translation was done by researchers)

“The factors that made me difficult in to master vocabulary were that I did less practice speaking English. I did not know what to say. I was nervous and worried if I made mistake when spoke English.” (Student 2, interview, Jember, 22nd November 2021)

When students wanted to pronounce the English words correctly, they must work hard to speak English every day. In fact, students practice speaking English only when they were in class. At home they rarely learn English, let alone speak English. Most problem encountered by students was that they did not find someone to practice the lesson they have learned in the class. This is generally the actual problem of Indonesian students in learning English.

The above data were in line with the study by Widiasworo (2019) which found that the students had difficulties in speaking because of inhibition, nothing to say, anxiety, lack of self-confidence and low motivation. This seemed to be the major problems faced by the students in the secondary vocational school level.

The fourth factor was external factors such as inadequate facilities and the influence of friends that make students difficult to master vocabulary. To support school learning activities, adequate facilities and infrastructure are needed, the facilities and infrastructure were affect the student learning process. It was as what Mulyasa (2004) proposed that educational facilities are equipment and supplies that are directly used and support the educational process, especially the learning process, such as buildings, classrooms, tables, chairs and teaching tool and media. Friends were also a factor that causes students had difficulty in mastering vocabulary. For example, when students tried to speak English their classmates laughed at them. This made students were not confident and they became lazy to speak and

learn English. It was told by student 5 as follows (translated by researchers)

"Maybe, I did not pay attention to what my teacher said and I also did not like English lessons, for sure. Especially when my teacher asked me to read English loudly and my friends laugh at me. And I was shy that made me lazy to speak English." (Student 5, interview, Jember, 22nd November 2021)

CONCLUSION

Based on the research results and the data analysis the findings show that students experienced difficulties in mastering vocabulary when they learned English. There are factors identified in this research displayed as the following summary: 1) this research pinpoints that students got difficulties in translating words or sentences in English into Indonesian and vice versa. Students also experienced difficulties in understanding the meaning of words, pronunciation, and misspelling. They also got problem to remember or memorize vocabulary in English due to lack of practice. 2) There are some factors that caused students difficulties in vocabulary mastery. The students were found reluctant to open dictionaries. They were also less interested in learning English. They did not practice speaking English regularly. Another factors were external factors including inadequate facilities and the negative influence of friends that made them difficult to master vocabulary.

REFERENCES

- Aristya, K. (2018). "Case Study on Students' Difficulties in Vocabulary Mastery at SMP N 1 Kebonsari Madiun." Unpublished Thesis, IAIN Ponorogo.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design* (2nd edition). London: Sage Publication.
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational Research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*. New Jersey: Pearson Publication.
- Harmer, J. (2007). *The practice of English language teaching* (4th Ed.). Harlow: Longman.
- Hatch, E.M. and Brown, C. (1995). *Vocabulary Sentence and Language Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Hiebert, E., Michael, H., Kamil, L. (2005). *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary: Bringing Research to Practice*. London: Routledge.
- Irvani, M.H.D., Ferdi. (2020). "An Analysis of Students' Difficulties In Vocabulary Mastery at State Senior High School 1 Kampar." Unpublished thesis, State Islamic University of Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau.
- Lynne, C. (2001). *Teaching Languages to Young Learners*. Cambridge University Press, New York.
- Machfudi, M. I. (2017). *The long-term impact of an English language teacher training program on teachers' practices in Madrasah Tsanawiyah in Indonesia*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Australia.
- McCarthy, M. (1990). *Language Teaching*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mulyasa. (2004). *Manajemen berbasis sekolah*. Bandung: Rosda Karya.
- Nation, I.S.P. (2000). *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Renandya W.A., Richards, J.C.. (2002). *Methodology in Language Teaching*. New York : Cambridge University Press.
- Rohmatillah, (2016). "Dictionary Usage in English Language Learning", *English Education Journal*, Vol. 9 Issue 1 186-197
- Salawazo, I.S., Simbolon, M., Hutabarat, V.E., Veronica, A.N., Saragih. E. (2020) "An Analysis of Students Vocabulary in Learning Vocabulary." *Linguistic, English Education and Art (LEEA) Journal*, vol.3 no.2
- Slameto. (2010). *Belajar dan Faktor yang mempengaruhinya*. Jakarta: Rineka Cipta.
- Surmanov, S. and Azimova, M. (2020). "Analysis Difficulties in Vocabulary Acquisition". *Journal of Legal Studies and Research*. Vol 6. Issue 1
- Thornbury, Scott. (2002). *How to Teach Vocabulary*, Essex: Longman, Pearson Education,
- Tozcu, A & Coady, J. (2004). *Successful learning of frequent vocabulary through CALL also benefits reading comprehension and speed, computer assisted language learning*. London: Routledge.

Widyasworo, C. (2019). "Students' Difficulties in Speaking English at the Tenth Grade of Sekolah Menengah Kejuruan." *Journal of English Education and Teaching*, 3 no.4, 533-538