



Students' Difficulties in Mastering Vocabulary in Eighth Graders at SMPN 06 Kaur

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the challenges faced by eighth-grade students at SMPN 06 Kaur in mastering English vocabulary, with a particular focus on identifying underlying factors that contribute to their difficulties. Employing a quantitative descriptive method, the research involved distributing a 25-item questionnaire to one class. Responses were analyzed using SPSS 26 to assess the students' vocabulary comprehension. The findings reveal that, among 30 respondents, only a few achieved a score of 84—classified as “very good”—while the majority scored between 70 and 74, indicating a generally “good” level of vocabulary mastery. Despite this, the average frequency score across categories remained low, with only 1% of students reaching the maximum score. The data suggest that while most students possess a satisfactory understanding of English vocabulary, a subset continues to struggle, particularly with grammar and pronunciation. These challenges underscore the need for targeted pedagogical strategies that address specific linguistic weaknesses to enhance overall language proficiency.

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INTRODUCTION

Previous studies have investigated challenges in vocabulary acquisition across various educational contexts; however, limited research specifically addresses eighth-grade students at SMPN 06 Kaur. This study seeks to bridge that gap by identifying key obstacles in vocabulary learning and proposing targeted pedagogical strategies to enhance students' language outcomes.

Vocabulary constitutes a fundamental component of language proficiency and is essential for effective communication. Individuals with a broad lexical repertoire typically exhibit greater competence in understanding and expressing ideas. Harmer (2001) notes that the difficulties in learning English include linking word forms with their meanings, establishing correct associations, and distinguishing between semantically similar terms. Consequently, language development entails a complex process involving the integration of appropriate word combinations to construct coherent expressions. Vocabulary proficiency is, therefore, a reliable indicator of a student's overall language performance. Harmer (2001) further explains that vocabulary acquisition is often hindered by mispronunciation and spelling errors, which significantly affect comprehension. Nation (2001) reinforces this perspective by asserting that language competence is strongly predicted by vocabulary knowledge and acquisition, emphasizing that students' productive vocabulary reflects their linguistic aptitude.

Aristya (2018) underscores the importance of vocabulary in mastering foreign languages, highlighting its prominence in educational materials and classroom practices. As such, vocabulary acquisition is a prerequisite for English language learning. Students' intrinsic motivation and eagerness to learn English are pivotal in overcoming vocabulary-related challenges. Humairoh and Amin (2023) define vocabulary as a set of terms associated with specific individuals, groups, or linguistic systems. Likewise, Idham (2011) considers vocabulary as the foundation of language, enabling the construction of sentences, paragraphs, and complete texts. In line with these views, vocabulary encompasses all known words that individuals employ to formulate new expressions. Despite their potential to learn vocabulary, students often struggle, particularly in grammar and spelling (Andriani & Wahyuningsih, 2019). While students may demonstrate progress, persistent difficulties with grammar, spelling, usage, and translation remain prevalent (Rahman, 2016). These findings underscore the necessity of further examining the challenges students face in mastering English vocabulary.

These persistent issues hinder students' ability to learn vocabulary effectively and reflect underlying educational deficiencies. As Cameron (as cited in Gushendra, 2017, pp. 45–55) outlines, pronunciation problems, spelling errors, grammatical difficulties, and poor word comprehension are common indicators of vocabulary acquisition challenges. These issues frequently emerge in learners attempting to expand their lexical knowledge. The aforementioned insights suggest that difficulties often revolve around the accurate construction of words, pronunciation, spelling, and sentence interpretation. Hence, this study aims to explore these challenges further and identify additional barriers impeding English vocabulary learning.

Accordingly, enhancing vocabulary skills—such as pronunciation, accurate spelling, sentence construction, and contextual comprehension—is essential. The aforementioned experts collectively affirm that vocabulary serves as the linguistic foundation for human communication. In contexts such as interactions with foreign speakers, the absence of sufficient vocabulary becomes a substantial challenge for students. Factors contributing to this include low learning motivation, limited vocabulary comprehension, and difficulties with pronunciation, spelling, word arrangement, and translation. Initial observations conducted over three days revealed that students struggled to communicate in English, which is a foreign language within their learning environment. This study was conducted at SMPN 06 Kaur to investigate students' vocabulary-related challenges, with data collected via questionnaires.

The research was situated at SMPN 06 Kaur due to the lack of prior studies focusing on this context. Unlike previous studies that employed experimental or quasi-experimental designs, this study adopts a quantitative descriptive method to provide a different analytical perspective. This rationale led to the formulation of the present study, titled "Students' Difficulties in Mastering Vocabulary in Eighth Graders at SMPN 06 Kaur."

Definition of Mastering Vocabulary

The acquisition of a second or foreign language necessitates a solid foundation in vocabulary. Numerous definitions have been proposed by experts. Richards and Renandya (2002) define vocabulary as a core element of language proficiency that supports students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. They argue that without a sufficient vocabulary and strategies for acquiring new words, students are likely to underperform and may avoid using opportunities for language exposure, such as reading, watching media, or engaging in conversations.

Hatch and Brown (1995) characterize vocabulary as a compilation of words unique to a particular language or the lexicon used by individual speakers. They also regard vocabulary as a system based on alphabetical structuring. Thornbury (2002) describes vocabulary as a set of meaningful words; without understanding the meanings, speakers are unable to comprehend or convey information effectively. Nation (2001) identifies three dimensions of vocabulary knowledge: form (spoken and written word parts), meaning (concept and reference), and use (collocation, grammatical functions, and constraints).

Synthesizing these definitions, the researcher concludes that vocabulary is a structured collection of meaningful words that enables effective communication. Lubis (2017, p. 12) defines vocabulary mastery as the ability to understand and use a language's lexicon effectively, which is crucial in facilitating communication across different contexts. Similarly, Cahyono and Widiati (2008, p. 21) emphasize that vocabulary mastery is indispensable for developing comprehensive language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—arguing that language fluency cannot be attained without it.

McCarten (2007) views vocabulary learning as a complex endeavor due to the breadth of required knowledge, including singular and plural forms, grammatical patterns, and idiomatic usage. Subini (2010, as cited in Subhi & Yasin, 2015) defines difficulty as any condition that presents an obstacle to achieving learning goals, thus necessitating considerable effort to overcome.

Indicators of Students' Difficulties in Mastering Vocabulary

Vocabulary acquisition is a critical component of foreign language learning, as a sufficient vocabulary base is essential for effective communication. Thornbury (2002, p. 27) and Cameron (2001, p. 88) identified several key difficulties in vocabulary learning, including pronunciation, spelling, grammar, and meaning. Thornbury (2002) further emphasized additional complexities such as word length, structural intricacies, and contextual nuances involving connotation and idiomatic expressions.

Rohmatillah (2017, p. 60) similarly noted that students often experience challenges in pronunciation, spelling, writing, and grammatical application. Moreover, students tend to struggle with comprehending word meanings and utilizing them within appropriate contexts. These expert perspectives indicate that pronunciation, spelling, grammar, and semantic understanding are among the primary indicators of students' difficulties in vocabulary mastery.

Drawing from this conceptual framework, several common indicators of students' challenges in mastering English vocabulary have been identified. These include:

1. Pronunciation

According to Nurmalita (2016, p. 253, as cited in Komalasari, 2022, p. 269), pronunciation encompasses accuracy, fluency, intonation, and stress. English pronunciation significantly differs from Indonesian, particularly in vowel and consonant usage as well as diphthongs.

2. Spelling

Reed (2012, as cited in Ramdhini et al., 2016, p. 189) outlined three dimensions of English spelling proficiency: phonemic, alphabetic, and mixed models, which contribute to the complexity of English orthography.

3. Grammar

Roinah (2019, p. 158, as cited in Komalasari, 2022, pp. 269–270) emphasized grammar as a structural framework for constructing coherent sentences. Mastery of grammar is critical for effective sentence composition in English.

4. Meaning

Harmer (2001, p. 16, as cited in Komalasari, 2022, p. 270) emphasized the importance of understanding various semantic elements of vocabulary, such as synonyms, antonyms, connotation, denotation, idiomatic usage, and collocation. These aspects are fundamental in interpreting the meanings of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs.

The difficulties noted above—especially in pronunciation, diphthongs, phonological structure, grammar application, and spelling—remain central to the vocabulary acquisition challenges faced by students. The inability to comprehend and apply such linguistic components severely limits learners' capacity to use English effectively in both spoken and written contexts.

Factors Contributing to Students' Vocabulary Learning Difficulties

Identifying the root causes of vocabulary learning difficulties is the first step toward addressing them through effective pedagogical strategies. Thornbury (2004, p. 27) identified several characteristics that make certain words more difficult to learn:

- a. Pronunciation

Words that are phonetically complex or difficult to articulate present additional challenges for learners.

- b. Spelling

Irregularities between pronunciation and spelling often lead to errors. Words with silent letters, such as "foreign," "listen," "climbing," and "honest," are especially problematic.

- c. Complexity and Length

While longer words are not necessarily harder to learn than shorter ones, high-frequency vocabulary tends to be shorter, enhancing learnability.

- d. Grammar

Grammar-related difficulties arise particularly when English constructions diverge from a learner's first language (L1). For example, deciding between "to swim" and "swimming" after verbs like "hope" or "enjoy" can be confusing.

- e. Meaning

Semantic overlaps often cause confusion. Words like "make" and "do" can be difficult to differentiate in usage, depending on context.

f. **Connotation, Idiomaticity, and Range**

Words with broader semantic applicability tend to be easier to learn. However, idiomatic expressions like "make up your mind" pose additional challenges due to their non-literal meanings.

Gower, Phillips, and Walters (1995, p. 143) also discussed several additional factors affecting vocabulary learnability:

a. **Comparability to L1**

Words that appear similar in both form and meaning to those in the learner's native language can be deceptive, often leading to incorrect assumptions.

b. **Similarity to Known Vocabulary**

Words related to those already familiar to learners are generally easier to acquire.

c. **Significance**

The social or emotional connotation of a word also affects its difficulty. For instance, while "slender" and "skinny" both refer to body shape, they carry different connotations.

d. **Pronunciation and Spelling**

Learners from language backgrounds with more consistent orthographies may find English spelling and pronunciation irregularities especially challenging.

e. **Multiple-Word Items**

Compound nouns and phrasal verbs, such as "sports car" or "put someone up," are often difficult due to their unpredictable meanings.

f. **Collocations**

Understanding which words naturally occur together, such as "strong coffee" versus "powerful coffee," is another key challenge.

g. **Appropriate Usage**

Knowing when and how to use a term correctly, whether in formal or informal contexts, is essential for accurate communication.

Based on these frameworks, it can be concluded that pronunciation, spelling, grammar, semantic complexity, and contextual appropriateness all significantly contribute to students' difficulties in learning vocabulary. Addressing these challenges is vital for enhancing English language proficiency.

The Importance of Vocabulary Mastery

Mastery of vocabulary is fundamental for anyone learning English as a second or foreign language. Alqahtani (2015, p. 22) asserts that vocabulary is essential for effective language use and for constructing coherent spoken and written texts. Vocabulary acquisition enhances the four core language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—in both ESL and EFL contexts.

According to Nakhalah (2016), vocabulary is the key to oral communication success; a rich vocabulary enables more fluent and precise expression. Moreover, vocabulary learning encompasses more than just word meanings; it includes synonym recognition, collocational usage, and understanding idiomatic expressions (Sari & Sutopo, 2018).

Ronaghi, Farahani, and Mahmoudi (2015) argue that vocabulary is indispensable to both language learning and use. As the core building block of language, vocabulary enables effective communication and deeper comprehension of both written and spoken texts.

Thus, the acquisition of vocabulary is imperative for learners who wish to engage meaningfully in English communication. Whether in verbal or written form, expanding one's vocabulary is essential to mastering English and developing a deeper understanding of its linguistic structure.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design, utilizing a structured questionnaire as the primary instrument for data collection. The reliability of the questionnaire was assessed through Cronbach's Alpha, ensuring internal consistency and instrument validity. The sample was selected using a purposive sampling technique, targeting students based on their prior academic performance in English subjects. Data analysis was conducted using statistical tools in SPSS version 26 to ensure both the validity and reliability of the findings.

Quantitative research is characterized as a methodology grounded in positivist philosophy, emphasizing the analysis of specific populations and samples through measurable variables (Sugiyono, 2013). This approach commonly involves probability sampling methods, the use of standardized instruments for data collection, and statistical testing of predetermined hypotheses. In this study, a descriptive quantitative approach was adopted to examine the specific difficulties encountered by students in mastering English vocabulary, particularly focusing on indicators related to pronunciation and spelling.

The results corroborate Nation's (2001) proposition that vocabulary proficiency plays a critical role in overall language competence. However, this study highlights that persistent issues remain in students' pronunciation and spelling accuracy, supporting the notion of linguistic interference. Specifically, the difficulties in pronunciation are attributed to phonological discrepancies between English and students' first language, while spelling errors appear to result from irregular correspondences between English phonemes and graphemes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the results of the research on the difficulties encountered by eighth-grade students at SMPN 06 Kaur in mastering English vocabulary. The study employed a descriptive quantitative approach to identify and analyze various factors that affect students' mastery of vocabulary competencies. Research data were collected through test instruments and structured questionnaires distributed to respondents and subsequently analyzed using descriptive statistical methods.

The discussion begins with the presentation of the results from the English vocabulary mastery test, followed by an analysis of the difficulties students face in understanding and retaining English vocabulary. This is complemented by findings from the questionnaire, which identify both internal and external factors influencing students' vocabulary acquisition. Additionally, this chapter discusses the educational implications of these findings and offers interpretations concerning how vocabulary difficulties affect overall English language learning achievement. The goal is to provide a comprehensive overview of the challenges faced by students and propose actionable recommendations for improving vocabulary mastery in the future.

Descriptive Statistics

Statistics		
Result		
N	Valid	30
	Missing	0
Mean		78,60
Median		78,00
Mode		80
Std. Deviation		2,527
Variance		6,386
Range		10
Minimum		74
Maximum		84
Sum		2358

The results obtained were mean value = 78.60; median value = 78; variance value = 6.386; standard deviation value = 2.527; minimum value = 74; maximum score = 84. Description of students' level of difficulty in understanding vocabulary in eighth grade at SMPN 06 KAUR can be seen in the following table:

fail	$X < 76$
low	$76 < X \leq 78$
good	$79 < X \leq 81$
Very good	$82 < X \leq 84$
excellent	$X > 84$

Explanation:

Minimum Score: = 74

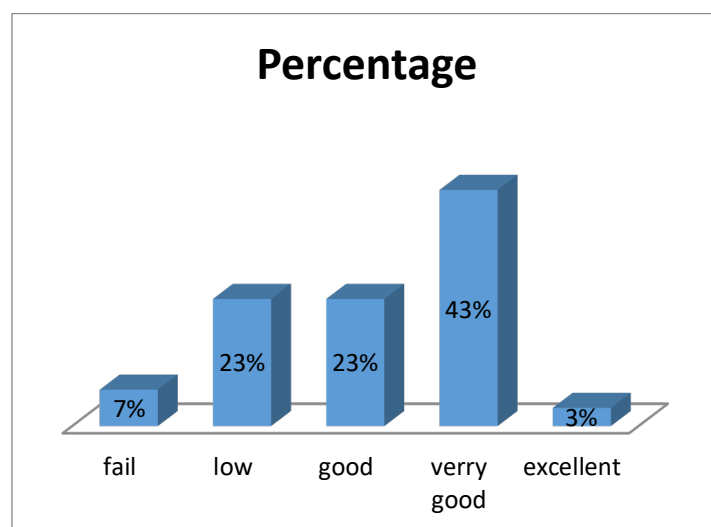
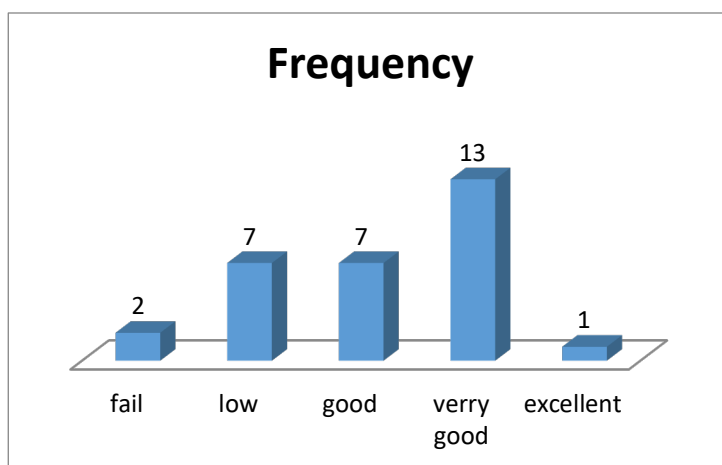
Maximum Score: 84

Wide Distribution Distance: $84 - 74 = 10$

Standard Deviation: $10 / 5 = 2$

Mean: $(84 + 74) \div 2 = 79$

Interval	Category	Frequency	Percentage
≤ 76	fail	2	7%
$76 < X \leq 78$	low	7	23%
$78 < X \leq 80$	good	7	23%
$80 < X \leq 83$	very good	13	43%
$83 > X$	excellent	1	3%
Total		30	100%



Based on the table and bar chart above, it is known that the level of difficulty of students in understanding vocabulary in eighth grade at SMPN 06 KAUR, for the “fail” category, is 2 students or 7%; the “low” category was 7 students or 23%; in the good category there were 7 or 23%, in the very good category there were 13 or 43%, and in the “excellent” category there was 1 student or 3%.

Discussion

This research highlights the importance of implementing targeted instructional approaches to address vocabulary learning difficulties among eighth-grade students. Future research should investigate the effectiveness of experimental interventions—such as phonetic training and gamified vocabulary learning—in enhancing students' vocabulary acquisition. Furthermore, the integration of digital learning tools may significantly improve student engagement and retention, fostering a more interactive and effective learning environment.

Based on a study conducted at SMPN 06 Kaur, several conclusions were drawn regarding students' difficulties in mastering English vocabulary. First, with regard to students' ability to understand and memorize English vocabulary, the findings indicate that the majority of Class VIII students at SMPN 06 Kaur demonstrated good comprehension skills. Most students scored within the "very good" and "good" categories, which suggests a solid understanding of English vocabulary. However, a subset of students continued to struggle, particularly in grammar and pronunciation. Out of 30 respondents, only a few achieved the maximum score of 84, while most students scored between 74 and 78. These results imply that although many students are performing well, areas such as pronunciation, spelling, grammar, and understanding word meanings still require attention. Pronunciation difficulties stem from phonetic discrepancies between English and the students' native language, thereby affecting their communicative competence. Likewise, spelling and grammar errors highlight the need for more intensive instruction in these areas. Students also face challenges in interpreting word meanings within sentence contexts, particularly when dealing with polysemous words or varying usages. Targeted exercises and instructional strategies addressing these areas can significantly enhance overall language proficiency.

Second, listening to students' pronunciation of English words reveals ongoing challenges despite relatively high average scores in this category. Several students continued to demonstrate difficulties pronouncing words correctly. These pronunciation challenges likely stem from the dissimilarities between English phonetics and the students' native language systems. Moreover, some students experienced difficulties in forming comprehensible sentences, which became evident in their incorrect responses to pronunciation and sentence construction tasks.

Third, helping students understand the meaning of words in English sentences remains critical. Although the average score in this category was relatively high, a number of students continued to struggle with comprehending word meanings, especially within sentence contexts. This difficulty arises due to the multiplicity of word meanings and their varied applications across different contexts. Students often find it challenging to interpret sentences accurately, particularly in translating and discerning the nuanced meanings of words in context.

Fourth, the study identified a lack of motivation among students as a significant factor influencing their difficulties in learning English. This was evident from several students who recorded low scores in grammar and spelling, reflecting a lack of enthusiasm in attending lessons or limited effort in learning new vocabulary. Additionally, factors related to the learning environment and instructional methods may contribute to low student motivation. To address this, educators should consider adopting more engaging and student-centered approaches to stimulate learners' interest and support the development of their vocabulary skills in more meaningful and enjoyable ways.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study affirm that while the majority of eighth-grade students at SMPN 06 Kaur possess a moderate to high level of vocabulary comprehension, several critical challenges persist—particularly in the areas of pronunciation, grammar, spelling, and understanding contextual word meanings. These challenges are often rooted in linguistic interference from the students' native language, insufficient exposure to authentic English usage, and limited strategic vocabulary instruction. The evidence suggests that vocabulary mastery is not merely a matter of rote memorization but a complex process requiring cognitive, phonological, and contextual engagement. Therefore, vocabulary acquisition must be addressed through a multifaceted pedagogical approach that nurtures both linguistic accuracy and communicative fluency.

Future studies are encouraged to explore experimental or longitudinal designs to assess the effectiveness of specific interventions, such as phonetic awareness training, digital learning tools, or task-based vocabulary instruction, in enhancing students' vocabulary mastery. Additionally, further research should examine the influence of affective factors—such as motivation, self-efficacy, and learning anxiety—on vocabulary acquisition, to develop more holistic

and personalized learning strategies. By integrating cognitive, social, and emotional dimensions into vocabulary pedagogy, educators can foster deeper language competence and long-term retention among learners.

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