

The Difficulties Encountered by Young Learners in Learning English Vocabulary

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Abstract – This study was motivated by the importance of English vocabulary mastery among elementary school students in the era of globalization, which demands foreign language competence from an early age. However, many students, including those at SDN 128 Pasir Putih, still face significant challenges in learning and mastering vocabulary. These difficulties include pronunciation problems, misunderstanding of word meanings, and limited ability to apply vocabulary in everyday contexts. Such challenges are influenced by internal factors such as low motivation, fear of making mistakes, and limited practice opportunities, as well as external factors such as minimal class hours, monotonous learning methods, and lack of support at home. This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study method to explore the experiences and needs of fifth-grade students in vocabulary learning. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and documentation, with purposive sampling used to select participants. Data were analyzed following the Miles and Huberman model, consisting of data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing. The findings revealed that students responded positively to interactive and student-centered learning methods, including games, songs, videos, pictures, and group activities. It is recommended that schools and families provide greater support and that teachers apply more varied learning strategies to improve students' vocabulary mastery and motivation.

Keywords – Vocabulary, EYL, Difficulties

I. Introduction

Education is a fundamental component in the realization of a nation's development goals. High-quality education systems create a conducive learning environment that allows students to develop intellectual, social, and emotional competencies necessary for navigating the demands of globalization (Mirawati & Sya, 2022). Among the many competencies required for the 21st century, the ability to communicate in an international language has become one of the most essential skills. English, as a global lingua franca, facilitates not only cross-cultural communication but also access to science, technology, and economic opportunities (Tauhid, 2023).

English language mastery encompasses four primary skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing, all of which are heavily dependent on vocabulary acquisition. Vocabulary is widely regarded as the foundation of language learning and is crucial for successful communication (Nation, 2001; Wardani, 2015). Without sufficient vocabulary, learners struggle to construct sentences, comprehend texts, or participate actively in conversations, resulting in communication breakdowns (Putri, Budiman, & Kartinah, 2023). For young learners, whose cognitive, emotional, and social development is still in progress, vocabulary mastery becomes even more critical as it lays the groundwork for future language development.

In Indonesia, English is taught as a foreign language beginning at the elementary school level, following the 2013 Curriculum, which recognizes English as a local content subject. This early introduction is intended to provide learners with a solid foundation to meet the

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demands of the global era (Budiman et al., 2020). Children aged six to twelve are in the concrete operational stage, according to Piaget's theory, meaning they learn most effectively through direct experiences and meaningful contexts (Piaget, 1972). Thus, vocabulary instruction at this stage must be interactive, engaging, and contextually relevant.

However, despite the inclusion of English in primary education, many Indonesian students continue to face difficulties in mastering English vocabulary. Research conducted in various schools indicates that students often struggle with pronunciation, comprehension of word meanings, memorization, and the ability to use vocabulary in communicative contexts (Fitriawan & Budiman, 2021; Marlina, 2023). These difficulties are not merely linguistic but are also influenced by internal factors such as low motivation, limited cognitive development, and fear of making mistakes, as well as external factors such as limited exposure to English, inadequate teaching strategies, and lack of parental support (Ningrum, 2019).

The case at SDN 128 Pasir Putih Muara Bungo is no exception. Observations revealed that students often mispronounce words, confuse word meanings, and fail to apply vocabulary in speaking activities. For instance, words like *elephant* or *butterfly* were difficult to pronounce correctly, and abstract words such as *adventure* posed comprehension challenges. Moreover, classroom observations suggested that teaching methods were predominantly teacher-centered, with limited use of interactive media such as songs, games, or videos that could otherwise make vocabulary learning more engaging (Putri et al., 2023).

Limited instructional time further compounds these challenges. English lessons are often allocated only once per week, which restricts opportunities for repeated exposure and practice—both essential for vocabulary retention (Ningrum, 2019). Students' home environments also offer minimal reinforcement, as most communicate in local languages or Bahasa Indonesia, leaving them with few opportunities to practice English outside the classroom (Fadillah, Budiman, & Kartinah, 2023). This lack of consistent exposure hinders the internalization of new vocabulary and reduces learners' confidence in using English in real-life contexts.

Teacher-related factors also play a significant role in shaping students' vocabulary acquisition. In some schools, English is taught by teachers without specific English language training, leading to less effective instructional delivery and a lack of innovative strategies (Rahmawati et al., 2024). According to Annisa et al. (2022), interactive and creative teaching strategies, including the use of digital media and collaborative activities, significantly improve vocabulary mastery and students' confidence. Therefore, teacher preparation and pedagogical competence are crucial to overcoming vocabulary learning barriers.

Another important factor is learner motivation, which is strongly linked to vocabulary acquisition success. Students with high intrinsic motivation are more likely to engage actively, memorize words, and practice their usage (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Amalia, 2023). Conversely, low motivation often leads to disengagement, boredom, and poor learning outcomes. Classroom observations and interviews conducted at SDN 128 Pasir Putih indicated that some students were reluctant to participate in

speaking activities due to fear of making mistakes, which further inhibited vocabulary use.

Existing literature offers various strategies to address these challenges, such as using songs, games, flashcards, and multimedia to make vocabulary learning enjoyable and meaningful (Rohimah et al., 2021; Purwanti, 2020). Total Physical Response (TPR) and thematic learning approaches have also been recommended for young learners, as they combine physical movement with language practice, thereby enhancing memory retention and student engagement (Vygotsky, 1978; Kurniawati & Karsana, 2020). Nonetheless, successful implementation depends on teachers' ability to select methods that match students' cognitive and affective needs.

By analyzing students' difficulties, this study seeks to inform the development of more effective vocabulary learning strategies. The findings are expected to help teachers refine their instructional methods, increase student engagement, and ultimately improve vocabulary mastery. Furthermore, they may serve as a basis for curriculum developers and policymakers to design programs that better support English learning at the elementary level.

The importance of vocabulary mastery in English language learning cannot be overstated, particularly for young learners who are building the foundation for lifelong language use. Understanding the difficulties they face is the first step toward designing interventions that are pedagogically sound and contextually relevant. This study therefore aims to answer two primary research questions; What are the difficulties encountered by fifth-grade students at SDN 128 Pasir Putih in learning English vocabulary? What internal and external factors contribute to these difficulties?. The answers to these questions are expected to provide both theoretical and practical contributions to the field of English language education in Indonesia.

II. Methodology Section

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design using a case study approach. The qualitative descriptive method was chosen to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the real experiences of students in learning English vocabulary. According to

Creswell (2014), qualitative research allows researchers to explore social phenomena in depth, providing a rich, holistic description of participants' perspectives. The case study approach was particularly appropriate because it focused on a bounded system namely, fifth-grade students at SDN 128 Pasir Putih and examined their difficulties in vocabulary acquisition in their natural classroom environment.

The research was conducted at SDN 128 Pasir Putih, located in Muara Bungo, during the 2024–2025 academic year. This school was chosen because observations during preliminary fieldwork indicated that many students faced significant challenges in learning English vocabulary. Furthermore, this location had not been used in previous studies of similar nature, allowing the researcher to collect original data. The data collection process was carried out over one academic semester to allow sufficient time for interviews, observations, and data verification.

The population of this study consisted of all fifth-grade students at SDN 128 Pasir Putih. The researcher used purposive sampling to select participants who met specific criteria relevant to the study. Purposive sampling allows researchers to deliberately select individuals who can provide rich and relevant information regarding the research focus (Creswell, 2014). Four students were selected as participants based on such as criteria; actively attending English lessons, having experienced noticeable difficulties in learning English vocabulary, and being willing to participate in in-depth interviews and observations. This small, focused sample ensured that data collected would reflect the actual challenges faced by students in vocabulary acquisition.

To obtain comprehensive data, multiple instruments and techniques were employed.

1. *Semi-Structured Interview*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the selected students to explore their personal experiences, perceived difficulties, and learning motivations in mastering English vocabulary. The open-ended nature of the questions allowed participants to provide detailed responses while still keeping the conversation focused on the research objectives.

2. *Classroom Observations*

Observations were conducted during English classes to document the learning environment, teaching strategies, student engagement, and specific

instances where students encountered difficulties with vocabulary. These observations were recorded systematically through field notes and, when permitted, audio or video documentation.

3. **Documentation**

Supporting documents such as lesson plans, teaching materials, and students' work were collected to provide context and triangulate data obtained from interviews and observations.

To ensure the credibility of the data, the researcher applied triangulation by comparing and cross-checking information obtained from interviews, observations, and documentation. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with participants to confirm the accuracy of interpretations. The data were coded and categorized according to emerging themes, including pronunciation difficulties, comprehension issues, and motivational factors.

The data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's (1994) interactive model of qualitative data analysis, which consists of three steps:

1. **Data Reduction:** Filtering and selecting relevant information from transcripts, observations, and documents to focus on key themes related to vocabulary difficulties.
2. **Data Display:** Organizing the reduced data into narrative descriptions and visual displays (tables, matrices) to illustrate relationships between themes such as pronunciation problems, memorization issues, and external learning factors.
3. **Conclusion Drawing and Verification :** Interpreting the patterns that emerged from the data and verifying findings through triangulation and participant confirmation to ensure validity.

This systematic approach enabled the researcher to produce a well-structured and reliable analysis that addressed the research objectives.

III. Results

The data in this study were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and documentation from four purposively selected fifth-grade students at SDN 128 Pasir Putih during the 2024-2025 academic year. The participants consisted of three female students (Aqila, Wanda, and Alesa) and one male student

(Abad). All participants were active in English lessons and had previously been identified as experiencing noticeable difficulties in learning English vocabulary.

The interview results revealed that all participants experienced challenges in several aspects of vocabulary learning. Pronunciation difficulties were the most commonly reported issue. Students frequently mispronounced words containing sounds that do not exist in Bahasa Indonesia or their local language, such as /ʃ/ in *ship*, /θ/ in *think*, and vowel contrasts like /ɪ/ vs. /i:/ in *ship* and *sheep*. Some participants stated that they felt nervous and hesitant to speak aloud when asked to pronounce new vocabulary because they were afraid of making mistakes and being laughed at by peers.

Difficulties in understanding the meaning of new words were also evident. Students reported that abstract vocabulary, such as *adventure*, *gift*, and *museum*, was harder to comprehend because it was rarely encountered in their daily lives. During classroom observations, students were often seen waiting for teacher explanations rather than attempting to guess or infer meaning from context. Some students also demonstrated confusion when a word had multiple meanings or when its meaning differed from their first assumption (e.g., misunderstanding "library" as "book").

Problems with memorization and recall were observed during oral drills and vocabulary review sessions. Students were able to repeat words shortly after being taught but tended to forget them after a few days. When asked to write or say the words from memory, most participants could only recall a small portion of the vocabulary that had been previously introduced. This was particularly noticeable for longer words such as *butterfly*, *elephant*, and *bicycle*, which students often omitted or mispronounced.

Observations further indicated that students faced challenges in using vocabulary in context. When given opportunities to construct sentences or engage in simple conversations, they often paused for long periods or relied on a mix of Indonesian and local language instead of using the English words they had learned. Some students reported feeling shy and embarrassed when asked to speak in front of the class, which limited their willingness to use vocabulary actively.

The classroom learning environment was also documented as a contributing factor to students' performance. The English lessons were held only once a week with a short duration, which limited exposure and

practice opportunities. Teaching methods observed were largely teacher-centered, consisting of drilling, choral repetition, and textbook exercises. There was minimal use of interactive learning media such as videos, games, or flashcards. This often resulted in students losing focus and becoming passive during lessons. Some students were observed looking disengaged, doodling, or talking with peers during the class session.

Family and home environment data, obtained from student interviews, indicated limited parental involvement in supporting English learning. Most students stated that they rarely practiced English outside of school and did not have access to English books, media, or online resources at home. They reported that their daily communication was entirely in the local language or Bahasa Indonesia, which meant that classroom learning was their only exposure to English.

The data display in table form indicated that each participant showed a similar pattern of difficulty across four main categories, pronunciation, meaning comprehension memorization, and usage in context. The frequency of reported pronunciation problems and hesitation to speak was the highest among the four categories. Memorization issues were also significant, as all students reported forgetting new vocabulary after a few days without practice.

Overall, the collected data provided a clear picture of the vocabulary learning challenges experienced by fifth-grade students at SDN 128 Pasir Putih. These challenges were consistent across participants, affecting their pronunciation accuracy, comprehension of meaning, ability to retain words, and confidence in using vocabulary for communication.

IV. Discussion

The present study set out to explore the difficulties faced by fifth-grade students at SDN 128 Pasir Putih in learning English vocabulary, as well as to identify the internal and external factors contributing to these difficulties. The findings reveal that pronunciation problems, difficulties in comprehending meaning, poor retention, and challenges in contextual usage are common among participants. These findings confirm earlier reports that vocabulary mastery is one of the most significant barriers for young learners in EFL settings (Wardani, 2015; Putri, Budiman, & Kartinah, 2023). However, this study extends the understanding of these challenges by documenting how limited exposure time

and teacher-centered instruction exacerbate students' lack of confidence and reduce opportunities for active practice.

Pronunciation emerged as the most frequently reported difficulty, which is consistent with Marlina's (2023) findings that pronunciation errors reduce students' willingness to speak and negatively affect their confidence. The data indicate that students avoided pronouncing unfamiliar words for fear of making mistakes, an outcome that aligns with the affective filter hypothesis proposed by Krashen (1982), which suggests that anxiety and low self-confidence can block language acquisition. In this study, the combination of rare exposure to authentic English sounds and minimal phonological support in lessons appears to have heightened students' apprehension.

The lack of phonetic awareness among students may also be linked to insufficient use of multisensory media in teaching. Previous research has shown that audio-visual media, songs, and games help young learners acquire correct pronunciation by providing repeated exposure in engaging contexts (Purwanti, 2020; Rohimah et al., 2021). The absence of such media in the observed lessons might explain why students relied heavily on rote memorization, which does not sufficiently support phonological development. This highlights the need for teachers to adopt techniques such as phonics-based instruction or Total Physical Response (TPR) activities that integrate sound, movement, and repetition.

Students' struggles with understanding word meanings were also significant. The difficulty in grasping abstract vocabulary suggests that instruction may not have provided enough meaningful context for learners to infer meaning. Cameron (2001) and Nation (2001) emphasized that vocabulary should be taught through contextualized input rather than isolated word lists. Without contextual clues, students in this study resorted to passive reliance on teacher explanations, which limited their opportunities for independent meaning-making and critical thinking.

This study also found evidence of weak vocabulary retention, as students often forgot words after a short period. This problem can be explained through the forgetting curve theory proposed by Ebbinghaus, which asserts that memory retention declines rapidly without spaced repetition. The limited weekly exposure to English further intensified this problem, as students lacked opportunities for review and recycling of learned

vocabulary. These findings underline the importance of incorporating repeated, distributed practice into vocabulary instruction to promote long-term retention (Putri et al., 2023).

Another critical finding was students' limited ability to use vocabulary in context. This result reinforces the distinction between receptive and productive vocabulary proposed by Djiwandono (1988), which stresses that knowing a word does not guarantee its use in communicative contexts. The students' hesitation to speak and tendency to mix Indonesian and local language words reflect that much of their vocabulary knowledge remains passive. This indicates the need for pedagogical interventions that encourage communicative practice and scaffold students toward active vocabulary use.

Teacher-centered instruction appeared to be a major external factor that shaped these outcomes. Observations showed that lessons were dominated by drilling and translation activities, with little time devoted to interactive tasks. This teaching style contrasts with the recommendations of constructivist learning theory, which advocates student-centered activities that allow learners to construct knowledge through active participation (Vygotsky, 1978). The lack of interactive tasks may have contributed to students' passivity and disengagement during lessons.

Limited exposure time with English lessons held only once a week further restricted students' opportunities for practice. According to Ningrum (2019), the intensity and frequency of English instruction are critical determinants of vocabulary acquisition among young learners. The results of this study support that claim, showing that insufficient time-on-task makes it difficult for students to consolidate newly learned words into long-term memory.

The home environment was another influential factor. Students reported minimal exposure to English outside the classroom, confirming previous studies that highlight the importance of parental involvement and language-rich environments for vocabulary growth (Rohimah et al., 2021). Without reinforcement at home, students' learning remained confined to the school setting, which likely slowed their progress. This finding suggests that schools should collaborate with parents to encourage simple at-home English practices, such as labeling household items or listening to English songs together.

Interestingly, this study found that students expressed a desire for more engaging learning experiences, such as games, songs, and visual aids. This is in line with Annisa

et al. (2022), who reported that interactive and creative activities increase learners' motivation and confidence. The fact that students themselves articulated this need provides valuable insight for teachers and curriculum developers, as it suggests that young learners are aware of the type of instruction that works best for them.

Motivation was a key internal factor influencing students' vocabulary performance. As Deci and Ryan (1985) emphasized, intrinsic motivation drives learners to persist despite challenges. In this study, students with higher interest in English displayed more enthusiasm and willingness to participate, even when tasks were difficult. Conversely, students with lower motivation were more likely to remain passive and disengaged. This finding highlights the importance of creating a supportive classroom climate that lowers anxiety and increases learners' sense of competence.

The present study contributes to the existing literature by showing that pronunciation difficulties, limited retention, and lack of contextual vocabulary use are interconnected rather than isolated problems. Students who struggled with pronunciation were also less likely to use words actively, which in turn limited their opportunities for practice and reinforced the cycle of forgetting. This cyclical pattern emphasizes the need for integrated solutions that simultaneously address pronunciation, meaning, and usage.

Another significant contribution of this study is the identification of the gap between students' needs and the instructional strategies used. While the curriculum mandates communicative competence as an outcome, the methods observed were largely traditional and did not promote meaningful communication. Bridging this gap requires a pedagogical shift toward student-centered approaches, the use of technology, and multimodal resources to make vocabulary learning both interactive and memorable.

The findings also suggest that teacher training and professional development are critical to improving vocabulary instruction. Teachers need support to implement innovative strategies such as task-based learning, project work, and digital media integration. Providing teachers with training in phonics, pronunciation instruction, and vocabulary recycling techniques could directly benefit students' learning outcomes (Budiharto et al., 2021).

In conclusion, the discussion of these findings demonstrates that vocabulary learning difficulties among

young learners are multidimensional, involving cognitive, affective, and contextual factors. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach that combines interactive pedagogy, increased exposure time, parental support, and motivation-building strategies. By doing so, students will not only master more words but also gain the confidence to use them in real-life communication, thereby achieving the objectives of early English education.

V. Conclusion

This study concludes that fifth-grade students at SDN 128 Pasir Putih encounter substantial difficulties in English vocabulary learning, primarily in pronunciation, comprehension of word meaning, memorization, and usage in context. These challenges are interconnected, with pronunciation problems and low confidence reducing students' willingness to speak and practice, leading to weaker retention and limited vocabulary application. The findings highlight that students' vocabulary learning problems are not merely linguistic but also shaped by affective factors such as motivation and anxiety, as well as contextual factors such as teacher-centered instruction, minimal exposure time, and lack of support outside the classroom.

Based on these results, it can be inferred that improving vocabulary mastery requires a comprehensive and integrated approach. Teachers should adopt interactive, student-centered strategies and incorporate multisensory media to make vocabulary learning more engaging and memorable. Repeated exposure and meaningful practice opportunities should be provided to strengthen long-term retention, while collaboration with parents can extend language learning into the home environment. With these improvements, students will be better equipped to gain confidence, retain vocabulary, and apply it in real communication, thus achieving the goals of early English education.

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