



Students' Difficulties in Learning English Vocabulary at SMPN 8

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to identify the types of students' difficulties in learning English vocabulary at SMP Negeri 8 Medan. This study employed a descriptive qualitative design. The data were obtained from 25 eighth-grade students through documentation in the form of vocabulary. However, the participants of this study were limited to 16 students who scored below the Minimum Mastery Criterion (KKM). The documentation was used to identify the students' difficulties in vocabulary learning. The finding revealed that students experienced four types of difficulties in learning English vocabulary, namely pronunciation, meaning, grammar, and idiomatic expressions. In pronunciation difficulties, the word "though" became the most difficult word, experienced by 12 students. Most students had difficulties pronouncing words containing silent letters and inconsistent sound patterns. In meaning difficulties, the word "bank" became the most difficult item, experienced by 11 students because students failed to understand its contextual meaning. In grammar difficulties, the items "went" and "in" were equally difficult, each experienced by 11 students due to students' limited understanding of grammatical patterns and preposition use. Meanwhile, in idiomatic expression difficulties, 11 students failed to interpret the expression "break a leg" correctly because they interpreted the expression literally instead of understanding its figurative meaning. The finding indicated that students still experienced difficulties in understanding vocabulary meaning, pronunciation patterns, grammatical usage, and idiomatic expressions in English learning.

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary plays an important role in English language learning because it becomes the foundation for students to understand and use the language effectively. According to (Ur, 1991), vocabulary refers not only to single words but also to vocabulary items such as phrases and idiomatic expressions that carry particular meanings. Through vocabulary mastery, students are able to develop their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. (Harmer, 2008) states that vocabulary learning should occur through meaningful exposure to language so that learners are able to understand how words are used in real communication.

In an ideal learning situation, students are expected to understand word meanings, pronounce words correctly, use vocabulary appropriately in context, and remember words effectively in communication. However, based on the researcher's preliminary observation and documentation at SMP Negeri 8 Medan, many eighth-grade students still experienced difficulties in learning English vocabulary. Several students had difficulties in pronouncing English words, understanding word meanings, using vocabulary in grammatical structures, and interpreting idiomatic expressions. These conditions indicated that vocabulary learning remained a serious problem for students in developing their English competence.

According to (Thonbury, 2000), vocabulary learning difficulties involve six aspects, such as pronunciation, spelling, grammar, meaning, length and complexity, and range, connotation, and idiomaticity. These aspects may influence students' understanding and use of English vocabulary. Students often experience difficulties because English words may have different pronunciation patterns, multiple meanings, grammatical forms, and idiomatic expressions that are difficult to understand literally. Thornbury's theory was used in this study to analyze the types of students' difficulties in learning English vocabulary.

Several previous studies have discussed students' difficulties in learning English vocabulary. (Putri, Rohmatillah, & Kholid, 2024) found that students experienced difficulties in pronunciation, grammar, and meaning in vocabulary learning. Similarly, (Lumbanraja & Fahada, 2024) reported that students still had problems in vocabulary comprehension and spelling, while (AS & Apoko, 2023) identified difficulties related to pronunciation, spelling, meaning, and memorization. These studies indicate that vocabulary learning difficulties remain a serious problem among junior high school students. Previous studies generally show that the students still experience serious difficulties in learning English vocabulary, especially in pronunciation, spelling, grammar, memorization, and meaning. These difficulties not only affect students' vocabulary mastery but also influence their ability to develop other English

skills such as speaking, reading, listening, and writing. The findings from previous studies indicate that vocabulary learning difficulties remain a common problem among junior high school students in learning English as a foreign language. Therefore, a deeper investigation is needed to understand the specific difficulties experienced by the students in vocabulary learning. However, most previous studies only focused on several aspects of vocabulary difficulties and did not comprehensively analyze the six aspects of vocabulary learning proposed by (Thonbury, 2000)

Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the types of the students' difficulties in learning English vocabulary among eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 8 Medan based on Thornbury's theory of vocabulary learning difficulties.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative method to describe the phenomena experienced by the students, namely the types of students' difficulties in learning English vocabulary. (Creswell, 2009) explains qualitative research is used to explore and understand individuals' or groups' experiences related to a social problem. The study was conducted at SMP Negeri 8 Medan. The participants of this study were eighth-grade students consisting of 25 students. However, only 16 students were selected as the main participants because they had not achieved the KKM (Minimum Mastery Criterion) in vocabulary learning.

The instrument used in this study was students' vocabulary learning documents. The documentation technique was used to identify students' difficulties in learning English vocabulary based on (Thonbury, 2000) six aspects of vocabulary learning difficulties, namely pronunciation, spelling, length and complexity, grammar, meaning, and range, connotation, and idiomaticity.

The data were analyzed using the qualitative data analysis model proposed by (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014), which consists of data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The students' answers were classified and analyzed based on Thornbury's theory of vocabulary learning difficulties. After that, the data were presented in tables and descriptive explanations to describe the types of students' difficulties in learning English vocabulary. Finally, conclusions were drawn based on the findings of the study.

FINDING

The data were obtained from 25 eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 8 Medan through documentation in the form of students' vocabulary learning results. However, the participants of this study were limited to 16 students who scored below the Minimum Mastery Criterion (KKM). The data focused on identifying the types of difficulties experienced by the students in learning English vocabulary.

A. Types of Difficulties

(Thonbury, 2000) explains that vocabulary learning difficulties appear in six aspects, namely pronunciation, spelling, length and complexity, grammar, meaning, and range, connotation, and idiomaticity. However, the findings of this study revealed that only four dominant difficulties were identified among the students, namely pronunciation, meaning, grammar, and idiomatic expressions. Therefore, this study aimed to answer the research problem concerning the types of difficulties experienced by the students in learning English vocabulary.

1. Pronunciation Difficulties

Pronunciation difficulties referred to the students' problems in pronouncing English words correctly, especially words containing silent letters and inconsistent spelling-pronunciation patterns. (Thonbury, 2000) explains pronunciation becomes difficult when learners find differences between written and spoken forms in English words. In this study, the pronunciation difficulties were identified from the students' vocabulary learning documentation. The frequencies presented in Table 1 showed how often the difficult words appeared in students' incorrect answers. Although the participants consisted of 16 students, one student could experience difficulties in more than one word.

Table: 1 Pronunciation Difficulties

No	Difficult Words	Frequency	Student's initial
1	Though	12	M, A, RS, FA, O, S, GA, SA, AP, J, AAF, ZFH
2	Cough	9	M, A, RS, FA, S, GA, AP, J, AAF
3	Knife	3	RS, M, S
4	Knowledge	10	M, RS, FA, V, O, S, SA, AP, J, AAF
5	Honest	6	RS, O, M, SA, AP, J

Data 1: Though

Based on Table 1, the word "though" became the most difficult word to pronounce, experienced by 12 students. The correct pronunciation of the word though according to the Oxford Dictionary is /ðəʊ/. However, several students pronounced the word incorrectly. For example, student M pronounced the word as [tɒ:g], while student A pronounced it as [tʌ:k]. These pronunciations showed that the students had difficulties producing the English sound /ð/ and tended to replace it with the sound /t/. In addition, the students also incorrectly pronounced the letters *gh* as /g/ or /k/, even though the letters are silent in the word *though*. This finding indicated that students still depended heavily on Indonesian pronunciation patterns in which almost all written letters are pronounced clearly.

Data 2: Cough

The second difficult word was “cough”, experienced by 9 students. The correct pronunciation of cough is /kɒf/. However, student RS pronounced the word as [kɒg], while student FA pronounced it as [kɔk]. Student RS pronounced the letters *gh* as the sound /g/, while student FA simplified the pronunciation and produced a final /k/ sound influenced by Indonesian sound patterns. These findings showed that students had difficulties understanding that the spelling of English words does not always represent their pronunciation directly.

Data 3: Knife

Furthermore, the word “knife” was experienced as difficult by 3 students. The correct pronunciation of knife is /naɪf/. However, student M pronounced the word as [knaɪf], while student S pronounced it as [knɪf]. Both students incorrectly pronounced the silent letter *k* at the beginning of the word. In addition, student S also simplified the vowel sound /aɪ/ into a shorter /i/ sound. These mistakes indicated that students still tended to pronounce English vocabulary exactly as it is written.

Data 4: Knowledge

In addition, the word “knowledge” became difficult for 10 students. The correct pronouncing of knowledge is /'nɒlɪdʒ/. However, student O pronounced the word as ['knɒlətʃ], while student SA pronounced it as [knawledʒe]. Student O incorrectly pronounced the silent letter *k* and changed the final sound /dʒ/ into /tʃ/. Meanwhile, student SA pronounced all written letters directly, including the final letter *e*, which should not be pronounced. These findings indicated that students still lacked familiarity with English pronunciation rules involving silent letters and complex ending sounds.

Data 5: Honest

The last difficult word was “honest”, experienced by 6 students. The correct pronouncing of honest is /'ɒnɪst/. However, student AP pronounced the word as [hɒnɛst], while student J pronounced it as [ɔnɛst]. Student AP incorrectly pronounced the silent letter *h* at the beginning of the word, while student J omitted the silent letter correctly but still produced an inaccurate vowel sound in the first syllable. These findings showed that even when students recognized silent letters, they still experienced difficulties in producing accurate English vowel sounds.

These findings indicated that students experienced serious difficulties in pronouncing English words containing silent letters and unfamiliar sound patterns. Most students tended to pronounce English vocabulary based on Indonesian pronunciation systems, causing many incorrect pronunciations. These findings were in line with (Thonbury, 2000) states that words with unfamiliar sounds and inconsistent spelling-pronunciation patterns are often difficult for learners to master.

2. Meaning Difficulties

Meaning difficulties referred to the students' problems in understanding the meanings of English words, especially words with multiple meanings and unfamiliar word forms. (Thonbury, 2000) states learners experience confusion when one word has more than one meaning or when words are used in different contexts. The results of meaning difficulties are presented in Table 2.

Table: 2 Meaning Difficulties

No	Difficult Words	Frequency	Student's initial
1	Bank	11	A, FA, V, O, S, GA, M, SA, AP, J, G
2	Unhappiness	9	A, RS, V, O, S, GA, M, SA, AP,
3	Bank and Unhappiness	8	A, V, O, S, GA, M, SA, AP,

Data 6: Bank

Based on Table 2, the word "bank" became the most difficult meaning item, experienced by 11 students. In addition, 9 students had difficulties understanding the meaning of *unhappiness*, while 8 students answered both meaning items incorrectly.

The first meaning item asked students to identify the meaning of the word "bank". In this item, many students only understood "bank" as a place to save money and failed to recognize its other contextual meaning as the side of a river. This finding showed that students still had limited understanding of words that contain multiple meanings depending on the context.

Data 7: Unhappiness

The second meaning item focused on the word unhappiness. In this item, the correct meaning was not happy. However, many students gave incorrect answers such as happy, very happy, or happiness. This indicated that students still had difficulties understanding derived word forms and the function of prefixes and suffixes in English vocabulary. Students were unable to identify that the prefix un- changes the meaning of the word into a negative form.

These findings showed that students still had difficulties understanding contextual meanings and derived word forms in English vocabulary. The findings supported Scott Thornbury's (2002) theory, which states that vocabulary learning becomes more difficult when learners encounter words with multiple meanings and unfamiliar word formations.

3. Grammar Difficulties

Grammar difficulties referred to the students' problems in using vocabulary correctly in sentence structures. (Thonbury, 2000) explains vocabulary learning is closely related to grammar because words are commonly used within specific grammatical patterns. The results of grammar difficulties are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Grammar Difficulties

No	Difficult Words	Frequency	Student's initial
1	Went	11	M, A, V, O, S, GA, SA, AP, J, S, G
2	In	11	M, FA, V, O, S, GA, AP, J, AAF, ZFH, G
3	Went and In	8	M, V, O, S, GA, AP, J, G

Data 8: Went

Based on Table 3, the grammar items went and in became the most difficult items, each experienced by 11 students. In addition, 8 students answered both grammar items incorrectly. The first grammar item was related to the sentence "She ... go to school yesterday." In this item, the correct answer was "went" because the sentence used the past time marker yesterday, which requires the simple past tense form. However, many students selected incorrect answers such as go, goes, and going. This finding indicated that students still had difficulties understanding verb changes in English grammar, especially the use of past tense forms.

Data 9: In

The second grammar item was related to the sentence "I am interested ... music." In this item, the correct answer was in because the expression interested in is a fixed grammatical pattern in English. However, several students chose incorrect prepositions such as at, with, and on. This showed that students still experienced difficulties in using appropriate prepositions in sentence structures.

These findings were consistent with Scott Thornbury's (2002) explanation that grammatical patterns connected to vocabulary may increase learning difficulties, especially when English sentence structures differ from students' first language patterns.

4. Idiomatic Difficulties

Idiomatic expression difficulties referred to the students' problems in understanding expressions whose meanings could not be interpreted literally. (Thonbury, 2000) states, idiomatic expressions are often difficult for learners because the meanings cannot be understood directly from the individual words. Learners usually interpret the words separately rather than understanding the expression as a whole. The results of idiomatic expression difficulties are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Idiomatic Difficulties

No	Difficult Words	Frequency	Student's initial
1	Break a Leg	11	M, A, RS, FA, GA, SA, AP, J, C, AAF, G

Data 10: Break a leg

Based on Table 4, 11 students experienced difficulties in understanding the idiomatic expression *break a leg*. In this item, the correct meaning of the expression was good luck or *semoga berhasil*. However, 11 students interpreted the expression literally and gave answers such as *patah kaki*, *jatuh*, and *sakit kaki*. Only a few students were able to identify the figurative meaning correctly. These findings indicated that students still had limited understanding of idiomatic expressions in English. The students tended to translate the words *break* and *leg* separately instead of understanding the expression as one complete meaning. This showed that students still relied on literal interpretation when learning English vocabulary.

The findings were in line with (Thornbury, 2000) explains that idiomatic expressions are generally more difficult because their meanings are not transparent and cannot be understood directly from the individual words. Thornbury also states that expressions with idiomatic meanings often create difficulties for learners because they require contextual understanding rather than direct word-by-word translation.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed that the students experienced difficulties in learning English vocabulary in four aspects proposed by Thornbury (2002), namely pronunciation, meaning, grammar, and idiomatic expressions. These findings answered the research problem of this study because the data showed that students still encountered various obstacles in understanding and using English vocabulary. The findings indicated that vocabulary learning was not only related to memorizing words, but also involved understanding pronunciation patterns, contextual meanings, grammatical usage, and figurative expressions. Theoretically, this study strengthened Thornbury's theory that vocabulary difficulties may appear in several interconnected aspects of language learning. Practically, the findings suggested that English teachers need to provide more contextual and meaningful vocabulary learning activities to help the students understand vocabulary use in real communication.

The findings of this study were closely related to the study conducted by (Jumatri, Ampa, & Hafid, 2022). Their study found that students experienced difficulties in pronunciation, meaning, grammar, memorization, and unfamiliar vocabulary because English language patterns were different from Indonesian language patterns. Similarly, the present study found that students experienced serious pronunciation difficulties in words such as "though", "cough", and "knowledge". Most students tended to pronounce the words exactly as they were written because they were influenced by Indonesian pronunciation systems in which written and spoken forms are usually consistent. For example, several students pronounced "though" as [tu:g] or [tu:k] because they incorrectly pronounced the silent letters "gh" and replaced the English sound /ð/ with /t/. In addition, students also experienced grammar difficulties in selecting appropriate verb forms and prepositions. Many students answered "go, goes, or going" instead of "went" in the sentence "She ... to school

yesterday.” These findings indicated that students still had difficulties understanding English grammatical patterns and pronunciation systems because they tended to transfer Indonesian language patterns into English learning. Therefore, the findings of this study supported the study by (Jumatri, Ampa, & Hafid, 2022) that differences between English and Indonesian language systems became one of the major causes of students’ vocabulary learning difficulties.

In addition, the findings of this study were also supported by Lutfiyah, (Lutfiyah, Nuraeningsih, & Rusiana, 2022) who reported that students experienced obstacles in pronunciation, meaning, vocabulary use, and connotation. Their study explained that students often had difficulties understanding contextual meanings and idiomatic expressions because English words may contain multiple meanings and figurative interpretations. This condition was strongly reflected in the present study, especially in meaning and idiomatic expression difficulties. In the meaning aspect, the students failed to understand the contextual meaning of the word “bank” because they only understood it as “bank” for saving money and could not identify other meanings depending on the sentence context. The students also experienced difficulties understanding the word “unhappiness” because they could not identify the function of the prefix *un-* in changing the meaning of the word. Furthermore, in idiomatic expression difficulties, many students interpreted “break a leg” literally as “*patah kaki*” instead of understanding it as an expression of good luck.

These findings showed that students still depended heavily on literal interpretation when learning English vocabulary. The findings also indicated that the students had limited exposure to authentic English expressions, causing them to misunderstand figurative meanings and contextual vocabulary use. The findings of this study had several implications. Theoretically, this study strengthened Thornbury’s (2002) theory that vocabulary learning difficulties may appear in several interconnected aspects such as pronunciation, meaning, grammar, and idiomatic expressions. However, this study only identified four dominant aspects from Thornbury’s six aspects, indicating that vocabulary difficulties may vary depending on students’ learning experiences and classroom contexts. Practically, the findings suggested that teachers should provide more interactive and contextual vocabulary learning activities. Teachers should not only focus on memorizing vocabulary, but also train the students to understand pronunciation patterns, contextual meanings, grammatical usage, and idiomatic expressions through communicative activities, pronunciation practice, sentence construction, and authentic learning materials.

This study also had several limitations. The study was conducted with a limited number of participants and focused only on students who had not achieved the Minimum Mastery Criterion (KKM). In addition, the study used documentation as the main source of data, so the findings may not fully represent all factors influencing students’ vocabulary learning difficulties. These limitations may affect the interpretation and generalization of the findings in broader educational contexts. Therefore, future researchers are suggested to involve more participants, apply additional instruments such as

interviews and classroom observations, and investigate other aspects of vocabulary learning difficulties in different educational settings. As a result the discussion showed that the students still experienced various difficulties in learning English vocabulary, especially in pronunciation, meaning, grammar, and idiomatic expressions. The findings emphasized the importance of developing vocabulary learning activities that are more contextual, communicative, and meaningful in order to help the students improve their vocabulary mastery in English learning.

CONCLUSION

This study concluded that eighth-grade students at SMP Negeri 8 Medan experienced four types of difficulties in learning English vocabulary, namely pronunciation, meaning, grammar, and idiomatic expressions. Among these difficulties, pronunciation became the most dominant difficulty experienced by the students. The findings indicate that the students still faced challenges in understanding and using English vocabulary appropriately in different contexts.

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