

Mastering English Vocabulary in a Rural EFL Context: Students' Difficulties and Learning Strategies

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the vocabulary learning difficulties and strategies employed by second-grade students in a rural junior high school in Indonesia. Using a descriptive qualitative design, the research draws on data from a 15-item questionnaire (n = 24) and semi-structured interviews with nine students across three proficiency levels (low, medium, high). Questionnaire results revealed that the majority of students struggled with pronunciation-spelling mismatches, semantically similar words, and grammar-related vocabulary usage. Interviews confirmed these challenges and highlighted that pronunciation anxiety, grammatical uncertainty, and limited contextual understanding hindered vocabulary mastery. However, students employed a range of coping strategies, including peer collaboration, dictionary use, multimedia engagement, and teacher assistance. Higher-proficiency students demonstrated more independent, metacognitive strategies, while lower-proficiency students relied heavily on teacher support. The findings underscore the need for integrated vocabulary-grammar instruction, context-based teaching approaches, and scaffolding of strategy use, especially in under-resourced EFL environments.

Keywords: *EFL learners, vocabulary acquisition, rural education, learning strategies, pronunciation, grammar, qualitative case study*

INTRODUCTION

Mastering vocabulary is a foundational component of language proficiency. Without an adequate vocabulary, learners are unable to comprehend or express ideas effectively, regardless of their grammatical knowledge. Vocabulary is the basis of communication, supporting listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills simultaneously (Nation, 2001). As Stahl (2005) explains, vocabulary knowledge extends beyond knowing definitions—it encompasses the ability to use words meaningfully in context. For learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), especially in non-native environments, developing a wide and usable vocabulary is essential for academic success and effective communication.

Despite its importance, acquiring vocabulary in a second language presents numerous challenges. English, in particular, is notorious for its inconsistencies in spelling and pronunciation, as well as the complex interplay of word forms and contextual meanings (Thornbury, 2004). Brown (2001) noted that EFL learners often struggle with phonological patterns, irregular verb forms, idiomatic expressions, and polysemous words. These complexities create significant

barriers to vocabulary retention and use. Moreover, learners are frequently unaware of connotative meanings and collocations, which further affects their ability to use vocabulary appropriately in different contexts (Ur, 1996).

A number of studies have highlighted the specific difficulties learners encounter in mastering English vocabulary. For example, Rohmatillah (2014) found that Indonesian students commonly struggle with pronunciation, spelling, word meaning, and appropriate use due to the differences between English and their native language. Similarly, Salam and Nurnisa (2021) emphasized that limited vocabulary knowledge is linked to challenges in pronunciation, spelling, and understanding word length and meaning. Hambali (2018) explored both internal (motivation, embarrassment) and external (environment, lack of practice) factors that influence students' vocabulary acquisition. These findings reinforce the understanding that vocabulary development is influenced by both linguistic and psychological elements.

In addition to difficulties, some researchers have examined the strategies students use to overcome vocabulary learning obstacles. Oxford (1990) identified key strategies such as using dictionaries, peer interaction, and exposure to authentic language use through media. Nunan (1999) emphasized that communicative tasks and contextual learning help reinforce vocabulary retention. Lai (2013) explored the role of digital tools, showing that listening to English music or watching videos positively supports vocabulary development by providing rich, contextualized input. These studies underscore that effective vocabulary learning strategies can help compensate for formal instruction limitations and individual learner constraints. However, despite these contributions, there remains a lack of research specifically focused on the vocabulary learning experiences of students in rural or under-resourced Indonesian schools. Most existing studies have been conducted in urban or university-level contexts, often overlooking the unique challenges faced by students in remote areas with limited access to technology, instructional materials, or English-speaking environments. SMP PGRI Kaiwatu, a junior high school located in a rural part of Indonesia, represents a critical case study for understanding vocabulary acquisition in such contexts. The linguistic struggles and coping strategies of students in this school may offer valuable insights into educational equity and curriculum planning.

Against this background, this study aims to investigate the vocabulary learning difficulties experienced by second-grade students at SMP PGRI Kaiwatu and explore the strategies they employ to address these challenges. It is guided by two research questions: (1) What are the difficulties faced by students in mastering English vocabulary? (2) What learning strategies do students use to overcome these difficulties?

METHOD

Research Design.

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the difficulties faced by students in mastering English vocabulary and to examine the strategies they use to address these

challenges. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate as it allows for a deep understanding of learners' perspectives within their real-world learning environment (Creswell, 2018). In this context, the researchers served as the primary data collection instruments, consistent with the nature of qualitative inquiry, where the researcher's interpretation and interaction are integral to the process.

Participants and Sampling.

The research was conducted at SMP PGRI Kaiwatu, involving second-grade students during the 2024/2025 academic year. The total number of students in the class was 24. To ensure representation of different language proficiency levels, the researchers used purposive sampling. With the assistance of the class English teacher, students were categorized into three proficiency groups—low, medium, and high—based on recent English exam scores and observed classroom performance. From these groups, a total of nine students (three from each proficiency level) were selected as focal participants for the in-depth interviews. This stratified purposeful sampling approach ensured variation in student experience while keeping the sample size manageable for qualitative analysis, as recommended by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014).

Instruments and Data Collection.

Data were gathered through two main instruments: a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire was designed to gather quantitative and categorical data about students' difficulties and strategies in vocabulary learning. It consisted of 15 Likert-scale statements organized under five thematic areas: (1) pronunciation and spelling, (2) word meaning, (3) vocabulary usage, (4) connotation and grammar, and (5) coping strategies. To ensure content validity, the questionnaire items were developed based on relevant vocabulary acquisition literature (e.g., Thornbury, 2004; Nation, 2001) and were reviewed by two English education lecturers. Furthermore, a pilot test involving 10 students from a comparable school was conducted. Based on the pilot results, minor adjustments were made for clarity, and the instrument achieved a Cronbach's alpha of 0.81, indicating high internal reliability.

In addition to the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews were employed to collect rich, qualitative data on students' experiences. The interview protocol comprised seven open-ended questions focusing on students' attitudes toward English, vocabulary learning experiences, specific obstacles encountered, and personal strategies for overcoming vocabulary challenges. The interviews were conducted in Indonesian to ensure comfort and clarity for the participants. Each session lasted approximately 20–30 minutes and was audio-recorded with prior consent. All recordings were transcribed verbatim and translated into English for analytical purposes.

Data Analysis.

The data analysis was conducted in two stages corresponding to the two main instruments: the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews. Each type of data was analyzed using an appropriate method to ensure rigor, clarity, and alignment with the study's research questions.

Questionnaire Data Analysis.

Data from the 15-item Likert-scale questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods to determine the frequency and percentage of student responses across key domains. Responses were grouped into thematic categories that reflect vocabulary learning difficulties—such as pronunciation and spelling, meaning, grammar, and connotation—as well as strategies for overcoming those difficulties. This analysis helped identify which aspects of vocabulary learning were most problematic and which methods were most commonly employed by students.

Interview Data Analysis.

The qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using the thematic analysis framework proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which involves three main steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. In the data reduction phase, interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim, translated, and then read multiple times to identify recurring patterns and meaningful units of information. Open coding was applied to extract relevant themes, which were then grouped into categories. In the display phase, a thematic coding matrix was developed to organize data across participants and themes. Responses were also classified based on the students' English proficiency levels (high, medium, low) to explore variations in experiences and strategies. This enabled cross-case comparisons and enhanced the interpretive depth of the analysis. During the conclusion drawing stage, recurring themes were synthesized and interpreted in relation to the research questions. Findings were cross-validated with the questionnaire data (triangulation), and member checking was conducted by sharing summary interpretations with the student participants for validation. This process ensured both credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis.

Ethical Considerations. Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the Ethics Committee of Pattimura University. Informed consent was secured from all participants and their guardians prior to data collection. Participation in the study was voluntary, and confidentiality was strictly maintained throughout. All personal identifiers were removed from transcripts and reporting to protect participants' anonymity and ensure ethical integrity.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of the questionnaire and interviews conducted with second-grade students at SMP PGRI Kaiwatu. The aim is to explore the specific vocabulary learning difficulties faced by students and the strategies they employ to overcome them. The findings are organized

into two main parts: the first presents quantitative data from the questionnaire, and the second provides qualitative insights derived from a thematic analysis of interview transcripts.

3.1 Students' Difficulties in Vocabulary Learning

To investigate the first research question, a structured questionnaire was administered to all second-grade students at SMP PGRI Kaiwatu. The statements addressed common problem areas reported in vocabulary acquisition literature, including pronunciation, spelling, meaning, grammar, and contextual use. Students responded using a four-point Likert scale, and their responses were tabulated to determine the most prevalent challenges. The results are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Students' Difficulties in Vocabulary Learning (N = 27)

STATEMENT CATEGORY	% STRONGLY AGREE	% AGREE	% DISAGREE	% STRONGLY DISAGREE
DIFFICULTY WITH PRONUNCIATION/SPELLING	55.55%	37.04%	3.70%	3.70%
DIFFICULTY UNDERSTANDING WORD MEANING	25.92%	70.37%	3.70%	0%
STRUGGLE WITH USING VOCABULARY APPROPRIATELY	14.81%	55.55%	29.62%	0%
DIFFICULTY UNDERSTANDING WORD CONNOTATION	25.92%	59.25%	14.81%	0%
DIFFICULTY USING VOCABULARY WITH GRAMMAR	18.51%	48.14%	29.62%	3.70%

Over 90% of students reported struggling with pronunciation and spelling, and a similar percentage found challenges with words that look alike but have different meanings. Connotation and grammar-related vocabulary usage were also significant obstacles. Notably, only 29.62% of students felt confident using vocabulary appropriately in context.

3.2 Strategies Employed to Overcome Vocabulary Challenges

The second part of the questionnaire focused on identifying the strategies students use to overcome vocabulary-related difficulties. This component directly addresses the second research question concerning the methods students adopt to support their vocabulary development. The items covered a range of strategies—from peer learning and dictionary use to multimedia engagement and formal instruction. Table 2 presents the frequency and percentage of students who reported using each strategy.

Table 2. Strategies Used to Overcome Vocabulary Difficulties

STRATEGY	NUMBER OF STUDENTS	PERCENTAGE (%)
PRACTICING WITH PEERS	24	88.89%
USING A DICTIONARY	23	85.18%
ASKING THE TEACHER FOR HELP	22	81.48%
WATCHING VIDEOS/LISTENING TO MUSIC	21	77.78%
PRACTICING WORD USE IN SENTENCE CONTEXTS	15	55.56%
ATTENDING ADDITIONAL ENGLISH COURSES	9	33.34%

The most commonly used strategies were collaborative and independent methods, including peer practice, dictionary use, and seeking teacher guidance. Multimedia exposure was also popular, while formal instruction (courses) was the least utilized.

3.3 Thematic Insights from Student Interviews

To deepen the understanding of students' vocabulary learning experiences beyond quantitative data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine students representing three levels of English proficiency: high, medium, and low. These interviews provided in-depth, personalized accounts of the challenges and strategies students face. After a systematic process of transcription, open coding, and categorization, three salient themes emerged: (1) pronunciation issues, (2) grammar struggles, and (3) strategy use. See figure 1. Thematic Coding of Student Interview Data. Each theme is presented below, supported by verbatim student quotations to illustrate the core findings

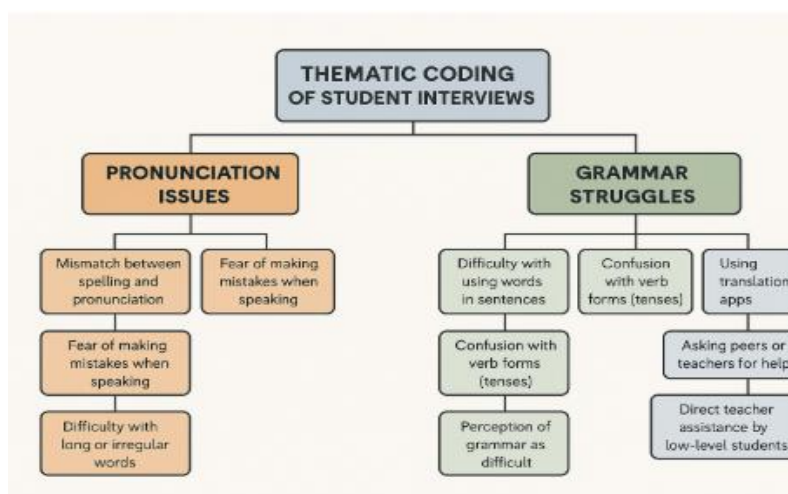


Figure 1. Thematic Coding of Student Interview Data.

3.3.1 Pronunciation Issues

A prominent theme across all proficiency levels was difficulty with English pronunciation, especially words that differed significantly from their spelling or Indonesian phonological rules. This mismatch not only caused hesitation in speaking but also affected confidence in learning new vocabulary. A high-proficiency student commented:

“Even though I know the meaning, I hesitate to say it out loud because the pronunciation is different from what I expected. For example, the word ‘psychology’—I used to say the ‘p’ until the teacher corrected me.” (Student H1)

Similarly, a medium-proficiency student stated:

“Sometimes the spelling makes me think a word sounds one way, but when the teacher says it, it sounds different. Like ‘enough’—I thought it was pronounced ‘en-ooch’.” (Student M2)

A low-proficiency student expressed frustration with longer words:

“I’m afraid to read out loud because I can’t say the words right. Long words are hard. If I make mistakes, my friends might laugh.” (Student L3)

These examples reveal that pronunciation difficulties stem not only from linguistic complexity but also from affective factors such as fear of ridicule. The discrepancy between English orthography and phonology emerged as a substantial barrier to vocabulary acquisition and usage.

3.3.2 Grammar Struggles

Students also reported that grammatical aspects of vocabulary—especially verb forms and syntactic positioning—were confusing and often led to misuse of words. This theme was more pronounced among medium and low-proficiency learners, although high-proficiency students acknowledged challenges as well. One high-level participant explained:

“Vocabulary is not only about meaning. I also need to know how to use the word correctly in a sentence. Like verbs—when I learn ‘go’, I also need to know ‘went’ and ‘gone’.” (Student H2)

An intermediate student described grammar as a major learning obstacle:

“Grammar makes vocabulary harder. I know the word ‘run’, but in tests, it becomes ‘ran’, and I get confused about when to use it.” (Student M1)

A beginner student echoed similar confusion:

“I don’t like grammar. It’s difficult. Sometimes I learn a word, but I don’t know how to change it when writing or speaking.” (Student L2)

These accounts demonstrate that vocabulary learning cannot be separated from grammar instruction. The integration of vocabulary into sentence structures, particularly when tense or plurality is involved, contributes to cognitive overload and reduces word retention.

3.3.3 Strategy Use

Despite the challenges, students across all levels shared various strategies they employed to manage vocabulary learning, ranging from independent to social approaches. These strategies varied by proficiency, with high-level students demonstrating more autonomy and low-level students relying heavily on teacher support. A high-level student shared:

“When I read a text and find a difficult word, I use Google Translate. If the internet is good, I can listen to how the word is pronounced too.” (Student H3)

An intermediate-level student stated:

“If I don’t understand a word, I ask my friend or my teacher. I also try to remember it by using it in a sentence.” (Student M3)

A low-level student reported limited strategies:

“I don’t know how to study vocabulary by myself. I usually ask the teacher when I don’t understand a word.” (Student L1)

These responses show a clear gradient in strategy sophistication across proficiency levels. High-proficiency learners employed metacognitive tools (e.g., translation apps), while beginners relied on direct assistance. The role of teacher scaffolding was crucial, particularly for less autonomous learners.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the vocabulary learning difficulties encountered by second-grade students at SMP PGRI Kaiwatu and the strategies they used to overcome them. Drawing on both questionnaire responses and semi-structured interviews, the discussion addresses the two research questions in turn: (1) What are the students' difficulties in mastering English vocabulary? and (2) What strategies do students use to overcome these difficulties? The findings are interpreted in light of current literature and contextual realities of rural EFL education.

4.1 Students' Vocabulary Learning Difficulties

The data show that students face a range of challenges in acquiring English vocabulary, particularly related to pronunciation, spelling, word meaning, contextual usage, and grammar. These difficulties were most pronounced in the areas of orthographic-phonological mismatch and semantic ambiguity, with over 90% of students reporting confusion caused by differences between English spelling and pronunciation, and by words with similar forms but different meanings.

These findings are consistent with earlier literature (Thornbury, 2004; Nation, 2001) but also resonate with recent work by Zhang and Reynolds (2020), who noted that learners in EFL contexts often struggle to form stable lexical representations due to irregular orthographic patterns in English. Similarly, Azkarai and Mendez (2021) found that lexical confusion is especially prominent among early-stage learners when encountering low-frequency or semantically nuanced vocabulary.

Interview data further emphasized these issues, revealing that students—regardless of proficiency level—expressed hesitation in using unfamiliar words due to fear of mispronunciation or grammatical misuse. This aligns with research by Rahimi and Zhang (2022), which highlights the affective filter as a critical barrier in vocabulary retention, particularly in environments where peer feedback is informal and sometimes judgmental.

Another significant difficulty was students' limited understanding of how grammar shapes vocabulary use. The ability to use words correctly in context—especially verbs—was hindered by limited knowledge of grammatical rules. This confirms findings from Hsu and Ching (2021), who argue that vocabulary acquisition must be tightly integrated with grammatical instruction to ensure meaningful language production.

4.2 Vocabulary Learning Strategies

Despite these challenges, the majority of students demonstrated proactive efforts to enhance their vocabulary knowledge using both formal and informal strategies. The most common strategies reported were practicing with peers (88.89%), using dictionaries (85.18%), and seeking teacher assistance (81.48%). These findings are supported by the work of Oxford (2017), who emphasized the role of social and cognitive strategies in second language acquisition.

Interestingly, students also made frequent use of media-based strategies, such as watching English-language videos and listening to music (77.78%). This reflects recent shifts in learner behavior, where digital resources are increasingly used to supplement classroom instruction. Lai and Gu (2022) observed that mobile-assisted vocabulary learning (MAVL) through platforms like YouTube or TikTok has gained popularity among young EFL learners for its accessibility and contextual richness.

The qualitative data revealed a clear stratification in strategy use by proficiency level. High-proficiency students tended to use metacognitive strategies such as translation apps, independent reading, and inference from context, while lower-proficiency students were more dependent on teacher-led instruction and direct explanation. This echoes findings by Teng and Zhang (2020), who argue that strategy development is both a consequence and a cause of increasing language proficiency—a dynamic, reciprocal relationship.

4.3 Pedagogical Implications

The findings have several implications for vocabulary instruction, particularly in rural or resource-limited educational settings. First, there is a need for explicit instruction in English phonology and spelling patterns to address confusion caused by orthographic irregularity. Incorporating phonics-based approaches may help students internalize sound–letter correspondences (Lee & Lin, 2021).

Second, vocabulary should not be taught in isolation. Teachers should integrate grammar instruction with vocabulary learning—using sentence-building activities and collocational awareness tasks—to reinforce functional usage. As suggested by Webb and Nation (2017), contextualization significantly increases retention and transferability. Third, the strong reliance on multimedia tools among students points to an opportunity: leveraging mobile-assisted learning in formal instruction. Teachers can curate or guide students toward appropriate media resources that align with curricular goals and promote learner autonomy. Lastly, scaffolding strategy use—especially for low-proficiency learners—is essential. This includes teaching students how to use dictionaries effectively, how to guess meaning from context, and how to build personalized word banks using notebooks or vocabulary apps.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the difficulties encountered by second-grade students at SMP PGRI Kaiwatu in mastering English vocabulary, as well as the strategies they employed to address those challenges. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data, the findings revealed that students face significant barriers in vocabulary acquisition, particularly in relation to pronunciation, spelling, word meaning, contextual usage, and grammar. These challenges were compounded by the inconsistencies between English orthography and phonology and a limited understanding of grammatical structures that influence word use. Despite these obstacles, students demonstrated a willingness to engage with vocabulary learning through various strategies. The most frequently employed methods included practicing with peers, using dictionaries, asking for teacher assistance, and engaging with multimedia resources such as music and videos. Notably, the use and complexity of these strategies varied according to students' proficiency levels, with higher-level learners demonstrating more autonomous and metacognitive approaches, while lower-level learners remained more dependent on direct teacher support.

The findings suggest several important pedagogical implications. First, vocabulary instruction in EFL classrooms—particularly in rural and under-resourced settings—should explicitly address pronunciation and spelling challenges through phonics-based and auditory-visual methods. Second, vocabulary should be integrated with grammar instruction and contextual usage to promote deeper understanding and retention. Third, teachers should actively scaffold vocabulary learning strategies and gradually encourage greater learner autonomy. Incorporating mobile-assisted or multimedia learning tools could further support vocabulary acquisition, particularly for students with limited access to formal English exposure outside the classroom. Finally, this study highlights the importance of considering learner diversity in vocabulary instruction and strategy training. While the current findings are context-specific, they provide a foundation for future research to explore vocabulary development across other rural Indonesian contexts, and to examine the long-term effectiveness of different instructional interventions in vocabulary learning.

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