STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN LEARNING VOCABULARIES

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Abstract

This study was conducted among early English learners when they encountered problems in learning vocabularies. The purpose of this study was to uncover difficulties in learning English vocabularies faced by 33 Pesantren (boarding school) students in West Kalimantan. These students had low achievement in vocabulary mastery. The data were derived from questionnaires and interviews with selected students. The data revealed that the students experienced four difficulties, namely, pronouncing unique English sounds, spelling, memorizing long syllable-words, and understanding meaning of unfamiliar words.

Keywords: descriptive, learning difficulties, vocabulary learning, descriptive qualitative study

Introduction

In simple way learning a new language means learning vocabularies of that target language. When students master vocabularies, they are able to deliver their ideas. The vocabularies they use convey meanings to deliver. In this way, mastering vocabularies play a significant role in language competency. Harmer (2001) states that the challenges in mastering English are making the right connections, comprehending the foreign language between the form and the meaning of words, and discerning between the meanings of words that are closely related. Therefore, by using appropriate word combinations, the production of the language relies on the simultaneous and complex process of extracting and constructing utterances. Moreover, the students' vocabulary mastery could serve as an accurate indicator of the student' performance and acquisition of all the language skills. Nation (2001) argues that vocabulary knowledge and its acquisition have a strong control to predict proficiency and the use of language. Hence, the vocabulary that students use in language production shows the level of language competency.

In receptive skills, vocabulary mastery enables student to understand what speakers utter. Similarly, in reading, vocabulary mastery helps them understand complex and multiple meanings of the texts. Furthermore, these complex and multiple meanings of vocabulary will be understood by the students in the form of sentences and paragraphs.

Meanwhile, English language teaching experts attempt to define vocabulary in language education. Nunan (1999) explains that vocabulary is a list of words in target language to be mastered as an initial competency. In addition, Szudarski (2018) highlights that 'words', 'vocabulary' and 'lexis' are examples of terms that are commonly used in the literature. A word can be described as any sequence of letters delimited by a space or punctuation mark on either side (Carter, 2012); lexis and vocabulary are words that are frequently used interchangeably and subsume all the lexical elements present in the language. Furthermore, the term 'lexis' is perhaps more specific as it involves not only individual words but also various types of

combinations between words (Scrivener 2005).

Similarly, Uakirgila (2012) describe vocabulary as knowledge of words and words meaning in both oral and written language and in productive and receptive forms. Specifically, they are used it to refer to the kind of word that students should recognize in order to read gradually with comprehension. In other words, to be fluent in the English language, students have to master English vocabulary.

Vocabulary has two types, both productive and receptive vocabularies, (Nation, 2001). Receptive vocabulary is the kind of vocabulary conveying the ideas to obtain language input from others through listening or reading to understand them. Hence, by mastering receptive vocabularies the students are able to understand the words' meaning when they are reading or listening the target language. Meanwhile, productive vocabularies refer to production of the language forms by speaking and writing to deliver messages and ideas to others. Thus, productive vocabularies can be regarded as the process of using vocabularies to express their thoughts and feelings understandable by others (Webb, 2008). Experts in language education use the terms of passive vocabulary for listening and reading, and active vocabulary for speaking and writing to mean receptive and productive vocabularies respectively. They categorize vocabularies in four groups: reading vocabulary, listening vocabulary, speaking vocabulary, and writing vocabulary.

Learning words is not a spontaneous process; the students have to face several steps as the required processes. Salam, Sukarti, and Arifin (2020) argued that the students needed to employ specific strategies to master English skills including vocabularies. In particular, Schmitt (2000, p. 4) claims that "the mechanics of vocabulary learning are still something of a mystery, but one thing we can be sure of is that words are not instantaneously acquired, at least not for adult second language learners". Consequently, the common situation shows that most of the students are struggling to mastery the English vocabulary.

Indeed, mastering the English vocabulary does not only knowing the meaning of the words but also dealing with the forms, meaning and use of the words. Schmitt (2000) states that besides the meaning of the words, or conceptual content and how they are connected other concepts and words, the students are also required to know the form of the words, for example, how they are pronounced, spelled, and how they are used grammatically correct, in order to develop their vocabulary mastery. By this way, the students are demanded to learn the vocabulary as a tool that enables them to figure out what expressions are useful to communicate effectively and to understand easily.

Some studies (Apriliyanti et al., 2019; Erina., 2017) found that vocabulary mastery could be obtained through creative teaching like using comic and context clues. However, Thornbury (2002) emphasize that to master English vocabulary, the students often pose a number of problems, specifically, to non-native English students. Those difficulties could trigger the students to show weak academic performance in different field of study associated with the language skills. According to Thornbury (2002) the difficulties faced by the students are pronunciation, spelling, length of words and complexity, grammar, meaning, range, connotation and idiomaticity. The current study, however, focuses on pronunciation, spelling, meaning, and length of words.

Methodology

This research was descriptive study where the investigator did not interfere the condition of the participants in order to reveal the true nature of the object of the study. The main focus of descriptive research is to describe a phenomenon and its characteristics without any intervention from the researcher. This design is more concerned with what rather than how or why something has happened (Cohen, Manion, & Marrison, 2018). By this definition, descriptive design is a part of qualitative research. Ary et al. (2010) state that qualitative research is aimed to comprehend a phenomenon by focusing on the entire picture rather than breaking it down into variables. Meanwhile, descriptive research is dedicated to making a description systematically and accurately based on the fact of the object being studied (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015).

In the current study, the participants were students of a Pondok Pesantren (Islamic Boarding School) in West Kalimantan. At first, these students were given vocabulary test to determine who mostly experienced the difficulties in learning vocabularies. Only those who obtained below 60 of the test were chosen to take part in questionnaires and interviews. Figure 1 shows the students' scores. Finally, there were 33 students involved in this study.

In this research, the Likert-like questionnaire (Appendix 1) was adapted from Thornbury (2002). There were 12 questions regarding to the students difficulties in mastering English vocabulary. The Questionnaire covers the following aspects:

Table 1. Table of Specification of the Questionnaire

No	Indicators	Item No.
1	Pronunciation	1,2,3
2	Spelling	4,5,6
3	Length of Words	7,8,9
4	Meaning	10,11,12

(Source: Thornbury (2002)

The qualitative data were derived from interviews. The interview was conducted to uncover detailed information and cases of difficulties experienced by the students. The participants of the interviews were also decided based on their score of vocabulary mastery test. The scores were
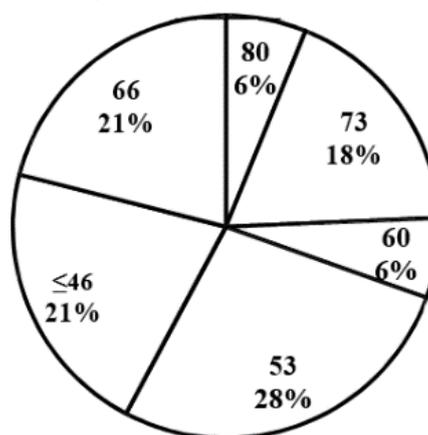
the following:

Figure 1. Student Vocabulary Mastery Score

The data from questionnaire were analyzed by calculating the mean score to obtain vocabulary mastery score. Meanwhile, the data from interviews were coded based on such themes under investigation as pronunciation, spelling, length of the words, and meaning.

Findings and Discussion

The overall findings of this study can be seen in Figure 2 below. The figure indicates mean score of difficulties faced by the students. High scores represent bigger difficulties. The data revealed that each category of vocabulary difficulty received more or less the same score indicating there was no big different among vocabulary difficulty categories. However, the data show that the biggest difficulty is about length of words indicated by the highest score (2.29) followed by spelling and meaning with the scores of 2.21 and 2.2 respectively. The least difficulty is pronunciation with 1.99. The following section discuss the

categories in greater details supported by interview data.

a. Pronunciation

Pronunciation was not be able to be separated with speaking skills, since pronunciation is one of the sub-skills of speaking. Therefore, pronunciation was viewed as one of the most crucial sub-skill to be mastered. Moreover, many students faced difficulties in pronouncing the words because some factors. The first one was the distinction between spoken and written English. For example, when the students pronounce the word island, listening, and knock. Some words containing silent letters were particularly problematic, especially for Indonesian students. The incorrect pronunciation was often caused by the lack of sound similarity between English and the students' native language. As can be seen in the statement below:

Susah, soalnya lain ditulis lain dibaca. (It is hard, because the difference between what is written and what is spoken). S4. FRZ

Biasa tu cara ucap sama cara tulis itu berbeda, trus antara satu huruf dengan huruf lain itu beda bacanya. (Usually the pronunciation and the written form is different, and then the pronunciation between one word and the other words are slightly different). S1. ALF

The other reason why the students were struggling with pronunciation was that the students were dealing with the components of sounds of English words and the elements of speech, such as syllables, stresses patterns ad rhythms.

Some students also argued that they often made mistakes in pronouncing the English words because they were not able to change the conceptual patterns appropriate for their first language that they have internalized since they were able to speak. The students needed help categorize or conceptualize sounds in a way equivalent to English. This situation triggered the students to face more difficulties in pronunciation. Sometimes the speech clarity or intelligibility dealing with the errors in stress, intonation, and rhythm appeared to affect the speakers' output.

Figure 2. Mean Score of Students' Difficulties
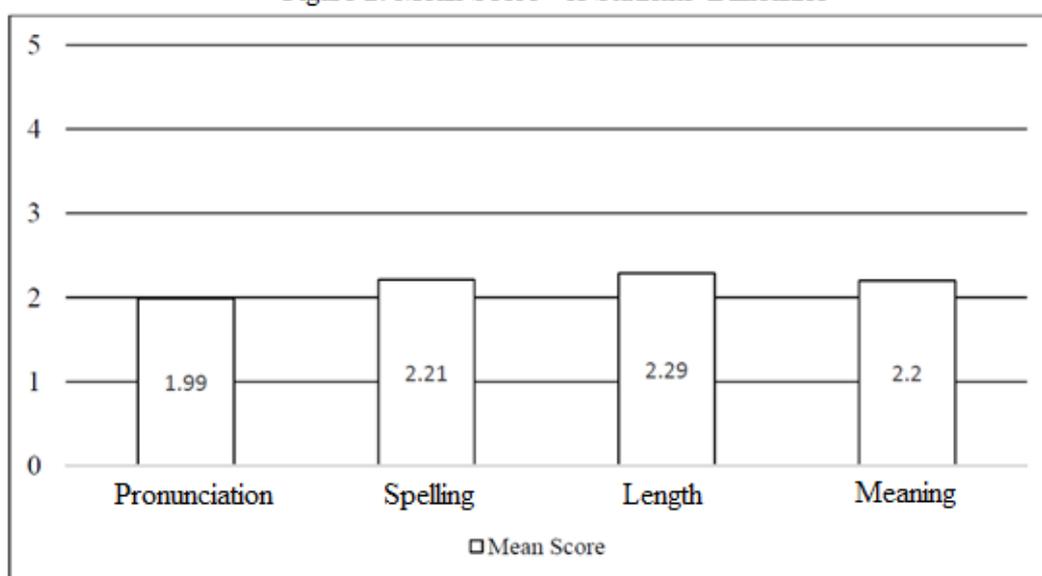
1. Strongly Disagree   2. Disagree   3. Naither   4. Agree   5. Strongly Agree

The students did not know where to put stresses in certain words, particularly the words that showed complex arrangement of the letters like approximately. Furthermore, in dealing with the stress in English words the students should also deal with the syllable, they have to be able to figure out how to stress the syllables.

Pengucapnnya itu lumayan sulit karena berbeda dengan Bahasa Indonesia (the pronunciation was considered hard, because it is different with Indonesia language) S10. SPI

This response was similar to that of the questionnaire result; the pronunciation was also one of the difficulties with the score of 1.99

b. Spelling

The students claimed that they felt hard to spell the English words. In spelling, the students were required to be able to figure out the silent letters in certain words. The mistakes happened when students failed to perceive a sound-spelling mismatch, which ultimately caused word-learning difficulties. More-over, vowel substitution, vowel omission, and consonant substitu-tion were the most common types of spelling difficulties.

Furthermore, a student stated that the English alphabet was complicated, they could never tell what sound a letter was going to make. Sometimes the letter did not make any sound; meanwhile, some letters could make more than one sounds. It caused them to feelt hard to recognize how the words were spelled, particularly those which had more than two syllables and those that they never heard before.

Hurufnya susah, ribet. (The spelling is complicated) S4. FRZ

Sometimes when words are brought into English, their original spellings are maintained, and sometimes they are given new, English spellings. In this way, it makes English spelling had several ways to be pronounced, and it makes English have discrepancies. Consequently, some students said that the discrepancies or the inconsistence between the ways the students currently pronounced and spelt could be one of the factors that made English spelling became one of the difficulties in mastering the English vocabulary

c. Length of the Words

Generally, longer words are more difficult simply because there are more to learn and to remember. Long words can consist of several morphemes. If the arrangement of the long words is familiar, the students felt less difficult in memorizing or comprehending the long vocabularies.

A student said that learning long words was not hard if they often found or used the words in the text. When they read the words often they could learn the words easier rather than the words that they are rarely used in a text. Those words were called high frequency words, meanwhile for the words that were rarely found in the text or rarely used by the students were called low frequency words.

Several students claimed that the longer the words were, the more the efforts were required to master the words. Based on the interview, the students stated that the length of the words influenced them in memorizing the spelling and the meaning of the words. They needed more time to remember the words; they also argued that long words were hard to pronounce.

Kalau katanya panjang saya kemungkinan tida biasa untuk mengeja hurufnya (if the words are long I am probably not able to spell the words easily). S9.SPI

Furthermore, two students said that learning long words could be more difficult if the words were rarely found in the text book. Besides, they could not be able to spell the words, they were also confused about the meaning of the words, because the long words have prefixes and suffixes which could derived the students to feel hard to master those vocabularies.

d. Meaning

The researcher found that students' hardly discovered the implications of new words. They mentioned that unfamiliar words made them difficult to translate and to understand the meaning of words.

Susah bu, susah mengartikannya karena jarang ditemui. (It was hard to figure out the meanings because they are unfamiliar words). S4. FRZ

The majority of the students were not able to distinguish the meaning of V1, V2, and V3. They were confused whether it was a new words or not, particularly the irregular verbs. Comparative degree could also be the difficulties for the students in distinguishing the meanings of the adjectives.

The students only depended on the dictionary in order to know the meaning of the words, however the actual meaning was not always simply definition. The students argued that they could not understand a text only by seeing the definition for each word, but they had to know the words in detail according to the context of the text. This problem also led the students to fail to recognize the alternative meanings of the words in the context. The students also found it hard to

decide which words were a noun, adverb, verb, or adjective.

Karena kalau kita tidak mengetahui rumusnya tu saya gak paham dan gak bisa bikin tulisan. (Because we do not know the pattern of the sentences, we are not able to make a sentence). S10. FAZ

Saya kesulitan memahami maknanya (I experience difficulties to understand the meaning). S8. SPI

Some students also stated that often in a text there was a different meaning of the words presented. Several texts tended to introduce new meanings of a words. The students sometimes were not conscious that words had different meanings according to the context of the words.

Conclusion

This study was designed to find out the students' difficulties in vocabulary learning encountered by the Pesantren students. Those who had low achievement in vocabulary master indicated difficulties in vocabulary learning. This study focuses on four aspects of learning vocabularies, namely, pronunciation, spelling, length of words, and meaning. The students experienced difficulties were due to the fact that English is still foreign in their contexts. Besides, English morphology system is to some extent different with that of Indonesian. This difference is normal and therefore it should be predictable.

The predictability here means that the problems faced by the students should have been anticipated by both the teachers and students so then they could learn better and faster the new vocabularies of the language they are learning.

The teacher is also recommended to create activities and develop material that could overcome the students' difficulties in vocabulary mastery. For instance,

developing instructional materials focusing on the students' need and interest.

Even though the teacher has a big role in overcoming the students' difficulties in mastering English vocabulary, it does not mean the students do not have contribution. The students with the help of the teacher are encouraged to solve their difficulties, finding appropriate learning strategies so they could improve their vocabulary mastery.

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