

Students' Efforts in Improving English Vocabulary: A Qualitative Study at Al-Ulum Junior High School

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ABSTRACT

Vocabulary played a fundamental role in learning English, as insufficient vocabulary mastery could hinder students' ability to understand and convey meaning effectively. This study aimed to explore the strategies employed by students of Al-Ulum Junior High School in improving their English vocabulary mastery. This research used a descriptive qualitative approach. The participants were 30 eighth-grade students selected through purposive sampling based on their active participation in learning activities. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The findings revealed that students employed various strategies, including recording new vocabulary in notebooks, utilizing digital learning platforms such as Duolingo and YouTube, and practicing repetition independently outside the classroom. These strategies reflected the use of cognitive and memory strategies and indicated a tendency toward autonomous learning. However, several challenges were identified, including low self-confidence and limited opportunities to use vocabulary in real-life communication. The study highlighted the importance of teacher support and a conducive learning environment in enhancing students' confidence and participation. These findings were expected to contribute to the development of more effective, flexible, and relevant vocabulary teaching strategies.

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I. INTRODUCTION

English is widely recognized as an international language used in various global contexts, acting as a bridge for communication in science, technology, international relations, and global commerce (Selvi et al., 2024). The mastery of English is no longer seen merely as an academic requirement but as a crucial life skill for the 21st century. In the Indonesian educational landscape, English is positioned as a compulsory subject, particularly starting from the junior high school level, where students are expected to build a solid foundation for their future academic and professional pursuits (Kemendikbud, 2013). One of the most essential components in achieving this desired language proficiency is vocabulary mastery. Vocabulary forms the core basis for developing all other macro language skills, including speaking, listening, reading, and writing (Akmalovna & Mamatkulova, 2024). Without an adequate bank of words, learners will inevitably struggle to decode written texts, comprehend spoken instructions, or express even the

most basic ideas, which ultimately leads to a complete breakdown in communication (Stahl & Nagy, 2005).

Despite its critical importance, the reality in many Indonesian schools reveals that students still experience significant difficulties in mastering English vocabulary. They often struggle to understand specific word meanings and, more importantly, fail to use them appropriately within a given contextual framework (Artaditya & Purnomo, 2017). These persistent challenges are often exacerbated by several external and internal factors, including limited exposure to English outside the formal classroom setting, low intrinsic learning motivation, and a severe lack of awareness regarding effective and personalized learning strategies (Xiaolan & Kunmei, 2023). At Al-Ulum Junior High School, a preliminary observation indicated similar problematic issues where students faced immense hurdles in remembering and actively using newly acquired vocabulary. However, amidst these educational challenges, it was also observed that some students demonstrated remarkable resilience by proactively developing their own independent learning strategies to overcome their linguistic limitations.

Conceptually, vocabulary mastery goes beyond the simple memorization of word lists; it refers to the complex ability to recognize, understand, and use words effectively and accurately in spontaneous communication (Anto & Anita, 2023). It is a crucial element in language learning because it directly and forcefully influences students' overall ability to comprehend and produce language in a meaningful way (Andriani & Sriwahyuningsih, 2019). Vocabulary acquisition involves understanding phonetic structures, spelling, grammatical patterns, and the sociolinguistic collocations of words (Cameron, 2001). Extensive research consistently suggests that a robust and varied vocabulary mastery significantly contributes to students' speaking fluency and reading comprehension (Suryanto et al., 2021).

A more comprehensive conceptualization of vocabulary knowledge further distinguishes between the breadth and the depth of word knowledge, as well as between receptive and productive mastery (Nation, 2013). Breadth refers to the sheer number of words a learner recognizes, whereas depth concerns how thoroughly each word is known, including its collocational, grammatical, and associative properties (Webb & Nation, 2017). Equally consequential is the distinction between receptive vocabulary, which enables learners to comprehend words encountered in listening and reading, and productive vocabulary, which allows them to retrieve and deploy words accurately in speaking and writing (Laufer, 1998). This distinction is particularly pertinent to the present study because learners frequently accumulate a substantial receptive repertoire while remaining unable to activate the same words productively—a gap that bears directly on the communicative competence this research seeks to examine.

To systematically achieve this mastery, learners employ various techniques. Scholars like Schmitt and Schmitt (2020) categorize vocabulary learning strategies into several distinct types: Determination strategies (used by individuals when faced with discovering a new word's meaning without recourse to another person's expertise), Social strategies (interacting with other people to improve language learning), Memory strategies (approaches that relate new material to existing knowledge), Cognitive strategies (exhibiting the common function of manipulation or transformation of the target language), and Metacognitive strategies (involving a conscious overview of the learning process and making decisions about planning, monitoring, or evaluating the best ways to study). In the modern educational era, digital and game-based learning have also explosively emerged as powerful, ubiquitous tools to significantly enhance student motivation and autonomous learning behaviors (Hsu & Wang, 2018; Musa et al., 2022).

Beyond the taxonomy of discrete strategies, the present study is theoretically situated within the broader framework of learner autonomy and language learning beyond the classroom. Autonomy, understood as the learner's capacity to take charge of and regulate their own learning, has long been recognized as a decisive factor in sustained vocabulary development (Oxford,

1990; Benson, 2011). More recently, scholars have argued that a substantial proportion of successful vocabulary acquisition occurs outside formal instruction, mediated by digital media, self-initiated practice, and incidental exposure (Reinders & Benson, 2017). Framing students' independent efforts through this lens allows the study to interpret their note-taking, application use, and self-directed repetition not as isolated behaviors but as manifestations of an emerging autonomous learning disposition.

At the same time, the affective dimension of language learning cannot be overlooked, as emotional variables strongly mediate whether receptive knowledge is ultimately converted into productive use. Foreign language anxiety—an apprehension specific to language learning contexts—has been shown to impede learners' willingness to communicate and to disrupt the cognitive processing required for word retrieval (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis similarly posits that heightened anxiety and diminished self-confidence raise a psychological barrier that constrains the accessibility of acquired language. These affective considerations are especially relevant to junior high school learners, whose fear of peer evaluation may substantially limit the active use of the vocabulary they have independently acquired.

While previous academic studies have extensively examined formal teaching methods and teacher-centered pedagogical approaches to vocabulary, there is still a noticeable gap in the literature regarding the independent, student-led efforts and specific micro-strategies utilized in improving vocabulary mastery, particularly within the specific sociocultural context of Indonesian junior high school students. Understanding what students do outside the teacher's direct supervision is vital for developing a holistic curriculum. Therefore, this qualitative study aims to deeply explore the specific autonomous strategies, subjective experiences, and psychological challenges encountered by students at Al-Ulum Junior High School in improving their English vocabulary mastery. The findings of this research are expected to provide invaluable, empirically grounded insights for language educators in designing more effective, empathetic, and student-centered vocabulary learning approaches.

II. METHODS

This study comprehensively employed a descriptive qualitative research design. Qualitative research is highly suitable for this investigation because it aims to provide an in-depth, nuanced exploration of students' behaviors, personal habits, and subjective psychological experiences in the process of improving their English vocabulary. Rather than focusing on statistical numerical data, this approach seeks to understand the "how" and "why" behind students' learning strategies in their natural educational setting.

The research was systematically conducted at Al-Ulum Junior High School, located in Medan, North Sumatra. The selection of this specific research site was based on preliminary observations that indicated a unique dynamic of varying English proficiencies and a high degree of active student engagement in finding alternative learning resources. The participants for this study consisted of 30 eighth-grade students. These participants were not chosen at random; rather, they were selected through a purposive sampling technique. The criteria for selection included students who demonstrated active participation during English lessons, those who exhibited varying levels of academic achievement in English, and those who expressed a willingness to share their personal learning experiences. This careful selection ensured a rich, diverse, and comprehensive pool of data.

To capture the complexity of the students' experiences, data collection was carried out through two primary qualitative instruments: semi-structured interviews and intensive classroom observations. The semi-structured interviews were designed to be highly flexible and conversational, allowing students to comfortably elaborate on their personal daily habits, the

specific digital or traditional tools they utilize, and the psychological barriers (such as anxiety or lack of motivation) they routinely encounter. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions targeting Schmitt's taxonomy of vocabulary strategies. Concurrently, classroom observations were conducted over four weeks to examine students' actual behaviors and learning practices in real classroom settings. The researcher utilized structured observation checklists and field notes to record how students reacted to unfamiliar words presented during lessons, their note-taking habits, and their frequency of initiating questions to clarify vocabulary meanings.

Data analysis was conducted strictly using thematic analysis procedures. The qualitative data processing involved several rigorous steps: first, verbatim transcribing of all audio-recorded interview data; second, meticulously reading and re-reading the transcripts to gain familiarity; third, coding significant textual segments that highlighted specific learning strategies or challenges; fourth, grouping and categorizing these initial codes into broader, overarching themes; and finally, interpreting the underlying meanings of these themes based on the existing theoretical context. To scientifically ensure the trustworthiness, validity, and reliability of the data, the study applied source triangulation by systematically cross-referencing and comparing the interview transcripts with the field notes gathered from classroom observations. Furthermore, member checking was performed by presenting the synthesized findings back to the participants to confirm the accuracy and authenticity of the researcher's interpretations of their statements.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The in-depth analysis of the qualitative data derived from both semi-structured interviews and classroom observations revealed that students at Al-Ulum Junior High School utilized a multifaceted, highly proactive approach to vocabulary learning. The findings indicate a strong shift towards autonomous learning, where students do not solely rely on the teacher's input but actively seek out knowledge. The data can be categorized into three dominant thematic strategies, accompanied by a specific theme regarding the challenges they face.

Strategic Note-Taking and Recording

The first major finding highlights the extensive use of cognitive strategies, particularly the traditional yet highly effective method of note-taking. Observation field notes confirmed that the majority of the purposively sampled students maintained a dedicated "vocabulary notebook" or a specific section in their English binder solely for new words. During classroom observations, it was frequently noted that students would immediately and automatically write down unfamiliar words written on the whiteboard by the teacher, often color-coding them or adding phonetic spellings based on how the teacher pronounced them.

This behavioral pattern was strongly corroborated during the interview sessions. For instance, Student A (Participant 3) articulated their habit clearly:

"Every time I find a new word, whether it's from the teacher's presentation or a text we are reading, I always write it down in my small notebook. I write the English word on the left and the Indonesian meaning on the right. When I am waiting for public transport to go home, I read them again."

Another student, Participant 12, added, "I don't just write the meaning. I try to write one short sentence using that word so I don't forget how it fits with other words."

These findings powerfully align with the cognitive strategy framework proposed by Schmitt and Schmitt (2020), where writing and repetition serve as mechanical tools for linguistic reinforcement. By physically writing down the words, students are engaging in

deep cognitive processing that helps transfer the vocabulary from short-term to long-term memory.

Integration of Digital Learning Platforms

A prominent theme that emerged from the data was the students' heavy reliance on modern technology to facilitate vocabulary acquisition. The digital native generation of Al-Ulum Junior High School predominantly utilized mobile applications and audio-visual platforms outside of school hours. Duolingo and YouTube were the two most frequently cited digital resources.

During the interviews, students expressed tremendous enthusiasm when discussing digital media. Participant 7 stated, "I play Duolingo for about 15 minutes every night before sleeping. It feels like playing a game, not like studying, because I get points and it reminds me to review words I missed before." This gamification element significantly boosts intrinsic motivation. Furthermore, YouTube serves as a vast resource for contextual vocabulary learning. Participant 21 explained, "I love watching English vloggers and Minecraft gaming videos on YouTube. If they say a slang word or a fast phrase I don't know, I turn on the English subtitles, pause the video, and check Google Translate. It helps me learn words that are actually used in real life, not just in textbooks."

This specific finding is highly consistent with the contemporary research conducted by Hsu and Wang (2018) and Musa et al. (2022), which asserts that digital and game-based learning environments drastically enhance student motivation and lower the affective filter. The visual and interactive nature of these digital platforms provides a stress-free environment for students to independently explore vocabulary at their own personalized pace.

Moreover, the students' use of YouTube in particular illustrates the value of contextualized vocabulary encounters. Unlike decontextualized word lists, audio-visual content situates lexical items within authentic communicative settings, enabling learners to infer meaning from surrounding cues and to observe how words function in natural discourse (Godwin-Jones, 2018). Such contextualized exposure supports incidental vocabulary learning and enriches the depth of word knowledge, since repeated encounters across varied contexts reinforce not only the meaning of a word but also its collocational and pragmatic behavior (Webb & Nation, 2017). The participants' deliberate practice of pausing videos, activating subtitles, and cross-checking meanings therefore represents a sophisticated integration of incidental exposure with explicit, self-regulated processing. Comparable benefits have likewise been reported for structured vocabulary games, which harness play to sustain learner engagement and consolidate retention (Fitriyah & Indah, 2022).

Repetition and Memory Retention Strategies

Beyond just discovering new words, the students actively employed memory strategies to ensure retention. Repetition, both verbal and mental, was a common technique. Students reported repeating words aloud to themselves to master the pronunciation and cement the meaning. Participant 15 revealed, "If there is a difficult word, like 'environment' or 'knowledge', I will whisper it to myself ten times while closing my eyes until my tongue gets used to it."

This rote learning and retrieval practice is a foundational strategy in language acquisition. Strong (2023) supports this by emphasizing that repetitive retrieval practice significantly bolsters long-term retention. However, it was noted during observations that this repetition was mostly done in isolation, lacking the communicative context necessary for complete vocabulary mastery.

Psychological Barriers and Practical Challenges

Despite their commendable independent efforts, the research identified significant hurdles that prevented students from fully mastering and utilizing their vocabulary. The most prevalent challenge was psychological: a profound lack of self-confidence and a high level of speaking anxiety.

While students possessed the receptive vocabulary (the ability to understand words when reading or listening), they severely lacked the productive vocabulary (the ability to use words in speaking and writing). Observation data showed that during speaking sessions, students often reverted to using basic, repetitive words despite having written down more advanced synonyms in their notebooks. When asked about this phenomenon in the interview, Participant 9 confessed, “I actually know the English word for what I want to say, but when the teacher points at me, my mind goes blank. I am so afraid my friends will laugh at me if my pronunciation is wrong or if I use the wrong grammar.” Another challenge was the lack of an authentic English-speaking environment. Participant 28 noted, “I memorize a lot of words at home, but I have no one to talk to in English. My parents don't speak it, and outside of school, everyone speaks Indonesian or the local language. So, eventually, I forget the words I memorized.” These findings illuminate the critical gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application. It underscores the arguments presented by Artaditya and Purnomo (2017) and Xiaolan and Kunmei (2023) that without a supportive, immersive environment, vocabulary retention decays rapidly.

The phenomenon described by Participant 9, in which the learner's mind “goes blank” upon being called on, is consistent with well-documented accounts of foreign language classroom anxiety. Horwitz et al. (1986) characterized such experiences as a distinct form of situation-specific anxiety that manifests through communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation. MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) further demonstrated that anxiety interferes with the cognitive processing stages of input, storage, and retrieval, which plausibly explains why anxious students fail to access vocabulary that is otherwise firmly stored in memory. Interpreted through Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis, the students' heightened self-consciousness effectively elevates a psychological barrier that obstructs the conversion of receptive knowledge into fluent production, thereby compounding the receptive-productive gap identified earlier.

In synthesizing these findings, the discussion highlights that while junior high school students are remarkably capable of employing autonomous cognitive and digital strategies to acquire vocabulary, their efforts are critically bottlenecked by affective factors. The transition from independent vocabulary memorization to active communicative utilization requires deliberate pedagogical intervention.

Taken together, these findings position the vocabulary practices of Al-Ulum students within the wider phenomenon of language learning beyond the classroom. The learners demonstrably exercised autonomy by curating their own resources, scheduling independent practice, and selecting tools aligned with their preferences (Reinders & Benson, 2017). Nevertheless, the data reveal that autonomy in acquisition did not automatically translate

into autonomy in use: the students' capacity to expand their receptive vocabulary through self-directed digital and cognitive strategies consistently outpaced their opportunities and confidence to activate that vocabulary productively (Nation, 2013). This asymmetry suggests that fostering autonomous vocabulary learning, while valuable, must be complemented by deliberate pedagogical scaffolding that creates low-anxiety, communicative contexts in which receptive gains can be consolidated into productive competence.

IV. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This qualitative study robustly concludes that the eighth-grade students at Al-Ulum Junior High School are not passive recipients of knowledge; rather, they actively and independently employ various strategic efforts to improve their English vocabulary mastery. The predominant strategies include traditional cognitive note-taking in dedicated vocabulary journals, the extensive utilization of digital media platforms such as Duolingo and YouTube for interactive and contextual learning, and the application of memory-based repetition techniques. These student-led strategies successfully promote autonomous learning behaviors and enhance the initial stages of vocabulary retention.

However, a significant limitation identified in this study is the presence of severe psychological and environmental challenges. Persistent issues such as low self-confidence, fear of peer judgment, and a stark lack of authentic practice opportunities outside the classroom drastically hinder the students' ability to transfer their receptive vocabulary into active, productive communication.

Based on these comprehensive conclusions, several practical suggestions and possible applications are offered. Firstly, English teachers play a profoundly crucial role in creating a low-anxiety, highly supportive classroom environment. Teachers should implement more communicative language teaching activities that focus on fluency rather than strict grammatical accuracy to build students' confidence in utilizing their new vocabulary. Secondly, schools are highly encouraged to formally integrate the digital learning tools that students are already using (like gamified apps) into the official curriculum to bridge the gap between informal and formal learning. For future researchers, it is suggested to conduct longitudinal studies to measure the long-term effectiveness of these specific digital strategies on students' productive vocabulary test scores over an extended academic year.

Furthermore, these findings emphasize the importance of balancing both receptive and productive vocabulary development in language learning. While students may successfully recognize and understand new words, the ability to actively use them in meaningful communication remains a crucial goal. Therefore, continuous exposure, guided practice, and supportive feedback are essential in helping students bridge this gap and achieve more effective vocabulary mastery in real-life contexts.

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