

THE OBSTACLES IN LEARNING VOCABULARY OF EFL STUDENTS

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Abstract

There are many problems faced by students which prevent them from improving their English skills and abilities. One of the most common is their vocabulary mastery. This study aimed to figure out what obstacles they encountered in learning vocabulary and what strategies they used to solve their problems. It is a survey and the respondents were 30 students of second semester students of Universitas Muria Kudus. Questionnaire was used as the instrument to obtain data. The study revealed that there were several obstacles in learning vocabulary, i.e., difficulty in distinguishing how to spell and pronounce English words correctly, difficulty in developing their vocabulary skills and difficulty in using vocabulary correctly and difficulty in understanding the connotation. To solve the problems, the students do some strategies, namely (1) dictionary strategy and memorization (2) peer practice (3) listening to music or watching English videos (4) share and discussion with friends, and (5) additional individual class.

Keywords: *obstacles, learning vocabulary, EFL students.*

INTRODUCTION

As a language component, vocabulary plays an important role to support the language skills in English both in oral and written communication. Schmitt (2021) explains that besides the meaning of the words and how are connected other words, the students are also involved to know the form of the words. Through this way, the students are demanded to learn the vocabulary as a tool that enables them to solve what expressions are useful to communicate effectively and to understand context easily. By mastering the vocabulary, they can improve their knowledge and their ability in mastering the language.

Based on the researchers' observation, the second students at Muria Kudus University still have some obstacles in learning vocabulary. It is due to the different features of English vocabulary compared to Indonesian including pronunciation, spelling, and the word use. Some scholars have investigated that there are some obstacles of learning vocabulary, they are: meaning, appropriate use, pronunciation, spelling, and connotation (Brown, 2001; Nation, 2000; Thornbury, 2004)

Vocabulary has a very crucial role in English learning that attracts scholars' concern to investigate it. (Rahmatillah, 2014) explored the students' difficulty in learning vocabulary in terms of kinds and factors causing it. The finding reveals that pronunciation, spelling, inflectional process, word meaning and word use are the types of difficulties found. Similar result is showed by a research conducted by (Hambali, 2018) that described the internal and external factors causing the problem of learning vocabulary. The research result is in line with a study held by (Reskiawan et al., 2020) that showed the factors include pronunciation, lack of practice, spelling, and word meaning.

As it is a language element, vocabulary has vital role in enabling English learners construct sentences or utterances. Lack of words collection will influence the students'

English achievement, both receptive and productive skills. Therefore, it is important to explore the obstacles that are faced by the second semester students of Universitas Muria Kudus in vocabulary mastery and how they solve it.

Principles in Teaching Vocabulary

Learning vocabulary cannot be separated from teaching vocabulary. There are principles that need to be addressed in facilitating learners with proper vocabulary instruction. The principles according to Renandya (2021) are: (1) Identifying vocabulary that learners need; (2) Focusing on high-frequency words first; (3) Teaching words with collocations and build connections (4) Multiplying meaningful encounters with target words; (5) Using a variety of text types to explore vocabulary in different genres; (6) Moving your vocabulary laterally with Word Families; (7) Providing multitudinous engagement in a multimodal and multi-sensorial way; (8) Conducting explicit teaching accompanies implicit teaching; (9) Integrating the four language skills, and (10) Providing opportunities for incidental learning of vocabulary.

In short, teaching vocabulary begins with learners need identification. Then process of teaching, revisiting, practicing is the next step that have to be considered. Applying to other language skills comes after.

Learning Vocabulary

Vocabulary is one of the most important elements of language. The quantity of one's vocabulary directly influences the development of the four English skills. Many teachers and educators have proved that vocabulary learning can accelerate the improvement of one's English level. The larger the learner's vocabulary scale, the higher his ability in English listening and reading. Although comprehension of the language is also influenced by relative background knowledge and reading strategies, the improvement of reading skills originally depends on the enlargement of vocabulary.

Vocabulary can be defined in various ways. (Renandya, W.A., & Richards, 2002) said that vocabulary is a core component of language proficiency and provides much of the basis for how learners speak, listen, read and write. Vocabulary is one of important things to be taught in learning foreign language because it will be impossible to speak up without variety of words (Ur, 2012). Thus, vocabulary is a list of words with their meanings that is used in the four language skills.

According to (Roger, 2005), vocabulary is important to students. It is more important than grammar for communication purposes, particularly in the early stages when students are motivated to learn basic words that they need to get by in the language. Also, as the lexical system is open, there is always something new to learn when students have done grammar. So, more advanced students are motivated to add their vocabulary stock, to understand nuances of meaning, to become more proficient in their own choice of words and expressions.

(Hatch & Brown, 1995) divides two kinds of vocabulary namely receptive vocabulary and productive vocabulary. Receptive vocabulary is words that the learners recognize and understand when they are used in the context, but which they cannot produce. It is vocabulary that the learners recognize when they see or meet in reading text but do not use it in speaking and writing. Whereas, productive vocabulary is words which the learners understand, can pronounce correctly and use constructively in speaking and writing. It involves what is needed

for respective vocabulary plus the ability to speak or write at the appropriate time. Therefore, productive vocabulary can be addressed as an active process, because the learners can produce the words to express their thoughts to others.

Another expert classified vocabulary into active and passive mastery (Stepherd, 1973). Active mastery is vocabulary mastery in speech production. The students are active to produce the words or sentences and be able to communicate the words with other one. It includes speaking and writing. Passive mastery is vocabulary mastery that only transfers the words or sentences as the students hear or watch, so they can express something. It includes the mastery of reading and listening.

Aspect of Vocabulary

The concept of a word can be defined in various ways, but three significant aspects teachers need to be aware of and focus on are meaning, use and form (Nation, 2000). Meaning encompasses the way that form and meaning work together, in other words, the concept and what items it refers to, and the associations that come to mind when people think about a specific word or expression. Further, (Nation, 2000) states that there are some ways to draw the attention to the use of words by quickly showing the grammatical pattern the word fits into (countable/uncountable, transitive/intransitive, etc), giving a few similar collocation, mentioning any restriction on the use of the word (formal, informal, impolite, only used with children, etc), and giving a well-known opposite or a well-known word or lexical set it fits into. While, the form of a word involves its pronunciation (spoken form), spelling (written form), and any word parts that make up this particular item (such as a prefix, root, and suffix) (Nation, 2000).

Obstacles in Learning Vocabulary

There are many factors that make learners facing obstacles in learning vocabulary. According to (Brown, 2001; Nation, 2000; Thornbury, 2004) the factors include vocabulary learning, those are: meaning, appropriate use, pronunciation, spelling, and connotation. Research shows that words that are difficult to pronounce are more difficult to learn. The spelling of many English words can cause problem students who speak languages with very regular spelling systems. Particularly spelling patterns can also cause confusion where the pronunciation is concerned. Sounds-spelling mismatches are likely to be the cause of errors, either of pronunciation or of spelling, and can contribute to a word's difficulty. While most English spelling is fairly law-abiding, there are also some glaring irregularities. Words that contain silent letters are particularly problematic: foreign, listen, headache, climbing, bored, honest, cupboard, muscle, etc.

When two words overlap in meaning, learners are likely to confuse them. Meaning encompasses the way that form and meaning work together, in other words, the concept and what items it refers to, and the associations that come to mind when people think about a specific word or expression.

Words that can be used in a wide range of context will generally be perceived as easier than their synonyms with a narrower range. Thus, put is a very wide ranging verb, compare

to impose, place, position, etc. uncertainly, as to the connotations of some words may cause problem too. Thus, propaganda has negative connotations in English, but it equivalent may simply mean publicity. On the other hand, eccentric does not have negative connotations in English, but its nearest equivalent in other languages may be deviant. Finally, words or expressions that are idiomatic will generally be more difficult than words whose meaning is transparent. Another difficult aspect that learners have to get to grips with is the connotation of the word. For example, does the word have a positive or negative connotation to a native-speaker. Sometimes, however native speakers do not even agree about the exact nuance of a word.

When to use vocabulary appropriately is also problematical. Some words and expressions are restricted to use in particular contexts. Also it is important that students know whether the word or phrase has a marked style formal or informal students have to take care with the use of colloquial and slang expressions.

Strategy to Solve Obstacles in Learning Vocabulary

There are many ways of learning vocabulary. (Hatch & Brown, 1995) mention five steps in learning vocabulary. Those are:

1. Having access to resources for word learning. Without sources, the learning process will be useless.
2. Having a unique aural or mental image of the new words' forms, or both. For students to assess their level of language comprehension, the media is required.
3. Learning the definitions of the words. It can help pupils avoid misinterpreting the new vocabulary.
4. The relationship between grammar and meaning must exist. The shape and meaning of the term must be linked in the students' minds firmly.
5. Using words is the final and most crucial stage of all the steps.

In addition, according to (Grauberg, 1997), the process of learning vocabulary involves four stages:

a. Discrimination

It is the fundamental step. To keep sounds and letters separate when speaking and writing, it requires the capacity to differentiate them from those right next to them as well as from the letters and sounds of words that are similar to them when listening and reading. Failure to distinguish is a common source of inaccuracy, as will be recognized later.

b. Understanding meaning

This entails comprehending the meaning behind the term or phrase in question. This is frequently simple because there is an English comparable word or because the term can be directly associated with its subject. As was demonstrated earlier, the idea can occasionally be strange.

c. Remembering

After presenting and explaining new content, the following step is to make sure it is retained. Once students have learned the word's meaning, they are no longer need to focus on it, and the word will be forgotten. The majority of students encountered words on approximately 10 times before realizing their meaning when no active attempt was made to acquire them. Before a term may be remembered at will, it needs to be used even more.

Consolidation and extension of meaning

d. Consolidation and extensive of meaning

Learning new words is not an instantaneous process if it were, and if presentation were the only critical variable involved, and then words would not be forgotten and need to be relearned. As it is, however, it seems that words are absorbed slowly overtime, and that only gradually do they become fully integrated into the learners personal stock of words, when he can use them with the same sort of fluency that characterizes the words he uses in his native language.

Other scholars Gu & Johnson (in Nation, 2000) offered some strategies that learners can do, as the following:

- beliefs about vocabulary learning,
- metacognitive regulation,
- guessing strategies,
- dictionary strategies,
- note-taking strategies,
- memory,
- rehearsal strategies,
- memory encoding strategies,
- activation strategies

Furthermore, (Gu, 2003) classified the strategies into task and person. Task-dependent vocabulary learning strategy involves “guessing, dictionary strategy, note talking, rote rehearsal, and so on.”(Nosidlak, 2013). The other strategy is called as person-dependent vocabulary learning strategy. It is individual variables, such as motivation, self-efficacy, gender, learning history, and learning styles, can affect the strategies chosen (Nosidlak, 2013).

Similar to the stated strategy, (Hatch & Brown, 1995) categorized some strategies of learning vocabulary, they are (1) dictionary strategy and memorization (2) peer practice (3) listening to music or watching English videos (4) share and discussion with friends, and (5) additional individual class.

RESEARCH METHOD

The study is classified as a qualitative research using survey. The data of this research are the students' obstacles in learning vocabulary of second-semester students of the English Education Department of Universitas Muria Kudus. The respondents of this research were thirty second-semester students. The data were collected by using a questionnaire consisting of open-ended and closed-ended questions. The researchers shared the questionnaire link to the students and had the students fill the questionnaire in google form. The data were then analyzed quantitatively.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Students' Obstacles in Learning Vocabulary

Based on the data, the obstacles in learning vocabulary consist of pronunciation and spelling, word meaning, word use, and connotation. The first obstacle is described in table 1 below.

a. Pronunciation and spelling

Table 1 Obstacles of pronunciation and spelling

No.	Statement	Scale				
		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	I feel difficult in learning vocabulary because there is difference between the spelling and pronunciation of the word	53.3 %	33.3%	13.3%	0.0%	0.0%
2.	I got difficulty in vocabulary because of the difference between Indonesian and English spelling	33.3%	26.7%	26.7%	13.3%	0.0%
3.	I feel difficult in vocabulary mastery because of the words or sounds spelling mismatch	26.7%	30.0%	20.0%	23.3%	0.0%

Table 1 shows that most respondents got difficult in spelling and pronunciation. The highest percentage is on spelling and pronunciation problem because words' spelling is different from their pronunciation (86.6%). Based on the percentage from questions above, it can be concluded that the three obstacles are classified in the high level of problem.

Looking at the previous research findings and the current research, it is obvious that the biggest obstacle in learning vocabulary is pronunciation and spelling. Different pronunciation of words and its spelling makes the students difficult to learn vocabulary. Spelling is the process of forming the words by putting letters together. The difference of Indonesian and English spelling is many often problematic for Indonesian learners. Particular spelling patterns make the students confused in pronouncing them correctly.

These findings are in line with previous studies. (Hambali, 2018) found that the students' difficulties in vocabulary are in pronouncing and spelling words. In addition to pronunciation and spelling, it reveals that the students get difficult in reading and memorizing English vocabularies. (Rahmatillah, 2014) stated that almost all of the students have difficulties in pronouncing the words, writing, and spelling; (2) students are confused to use words based on the context and to understand idiomatic words or expressions.

b. Obstacles of word meaning

The second obstacle is word meaning. Word meaning problem is divided into 3 items covering synonym and antonym, determining word's meaning and inconsistency of form and meaning. The detail result is presented in table 2.

Table 2. Obstacle of word meaning

No.	Statement	Scale				
		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	I feel difficult in vocabulary mastery in terms of synonyms and antonym	40.0%	33.3%	6.7%	6.7%	13.3%
2.	I feel difficult in determining words' meaning correctly	33.3%	26.7%	20.0%	16.7%	3.3%
3.	I feel difficult because some words are similar in form but different in meaning	33.3%	33.3%	33.3%	0.0%	0.0%

Based on the table above, it can be seen that all three items referring to the obstacles belong to high level. And the most difficult obstacle is mastering synonym and antonym (73.3%). It means that the students admitted that synonym and antonym is the most challenging topic of vocabulary.

The second obstacle is dealing with meaning of English words or sentences, (Harmer, 2007) states that there are some topics that have to be mastered to help the students understand word meaning namely synonym, antonym, connotation and denotation, idioms, word combination or collocation, and grammar. Lack of mastery of those may cause a problem in figuring out the meaning of words since several words have various meanings.

c. Vocabulary use

The next obstacle is inappropriate vocabulary use. It consists of two items including the restriction of particular context use and unfamiliarity to well-known words or sentence. The result is described as the following:

Table 3. Obstacle of inappropriate vocabulary use

No.	Statement	Scale				
		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	I feel difficult to use vocabulary appropriately because some words are restricted to use in particular context	20.0%	33.3%	20.0%	20.0%	6.7%
2.	I feel difficult to give a well-known opposite or well-known word or lexical set it fits into a word or sentence	33.3%	43.3%	10.0%	6.7%	6.7%

Among the two items, obstacle of unfamiliarity to well-known words or sentence becomes the highest percentage. It is found that 76.6% of the students admit that they got difficulty in identifying a well-known synonym or antonym of a word. Whereas, the obstacle of words' use restriction is classified moderate level of problem as the percentage is 53%. In learning vocabulary, using vocabulary in the proper context is important. The findings showed that the students get difficult to figure out well-known opposite or well-known word or lexical set that fits into words or sentences.

d. Connotation

The last obstacle is connotation covering 2 items about difficulties in understanding connotation and difficulty in differentiating word connotation meaning. The complete data can be seen in table 4 below.

Table 4. Obstacle of Connotation

No.	Statement	Scale				Strongly Disagree
		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	
1.	I feel difficult in understanding the connotation of a word because the word have a positive or negative meaning	26.7%	33.3%	33.3%	6.7%	0.0%
2.	I feel difficult in identifying the words connotation meaning	13.3%	33.3%	20.0%	26.7%	6.7%

Based on the data above, it can be seen that most respondents reported that they got difficult in understanding word connotation because the words have both positive and negative meaning (60%). The level of problem is categorized as high. Another obstacle of connotation is in identifying the words connotation meaning. There is 46.6% of the respondents stating of getting difficulty in identifying the connotation meaning, 20% states that they are neutral and 33.4% gave negative response to the statement. It means that the percentage of the connotation obstacle above is moderate category.

The last obstacle is understanding the connotation of the English word. The students struggle to understand the connotation meaning of the word. Connotation of the word also has a positive or negative. It makes the students difficult to understand the connotation of the word well.

Many researches in this issue have been conducted and the present research highlights the existing findings that the challenge in learning vocabularies includes pronunciation, spelling, meaning, using, and understanding the vocabularies, etc. Indonesian students can be said to share the same challenges in learning vocabulary. Though it is a specific research context, the findings of the previous research might represent the common problems faced by Indonesian learners.

2. Strategy to Solve the Obstacles in Learning Vocabulary

The second objective of the study is finding out the students' strategy to solve the obstacles in learning vocabulary. There are some strategies found out including: (1) using

dictionary to find the difficult words and memorize them; (2) practicing with friends; (3) listening to music or watching English videos; (4) sharing and discussing with friends; (5) joining private class. The detailed result is described in table 5 as the following.

Table 5. Strategy to solve the obstacle in learning vocabulary

No.	Statement	Scale				
		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	I use dictionary to find difficult word and memorizing the word to developing of vocabulary mastery	30.0%	33.3%	33.3%	3.3%	0.0%
2.	I practice with peers to increase the vocabulary mastery	20.0%	33.3%	36.7%	6.7%	3.3%
3.	I always listening to music or watch videos to improve vocabulary mastery	26.7%	36.7%	36.7%	0.0%	0.0%
4.	I share and discuss with friend to improve vocabulary mastery	40.0%	36.7%	13.3%	3.3%	6.7%
5.	I join private classto increase the ability in vocabulary mastery	43.3%	40.0%	10.0%	6.7%	0.0%

The first strategy to solve the obstacles in learn vocabulary that the respondents do is using dictionary and memorizing the word. The percentage is 63.3%. By using dictionary and memorizing the word, the students can develop their vocabulary mastery. They can find new words that they have never known before and find the meaning in dictionary. Then, they can memorize the new words well.

The second strategy is practicing with friends to solve the obstacles in learn vocabulary. The result of percentage in this question is 53.3%. Having rehearsal with peers can improve their vocabulary mastery because peer collaboration support each individual to memorize new words. Besides through rehearsal students also improve their speaking skills.

The third strategy to solve the obstacles in learning vocabulary is by listening to music or watching videos. The result of the questionnaire is 63.4%. By listening music or watching videos, the students will improve their vocabulary mastery easily. By watching or listening, they can get and remember new words that they have never heard before, and understand the meaning well. In addition, they also enjoy more in learning English.

The next strategy was sharing and discussing with friends to solve the obstacle in learning vocabulary mastery. Table 5 shows that there is 76.7% of the respondents who share and discuss with friends when they got difficulty in learning vocabulary. Through interaction, they discuss any new words with their peers. They can help each other in finding the meaning and use it in speaking or writing.

The last strategy to solve the obstacles in learning vocabulary is by joining private classes. The percentage of the positive response is 83.3%. By joining private classes, they are guided by the teacher to improve their vocabulary.

From the obtained data, it was revealed that students applied some strategies, they are (1) suggesting and encouraging themselves by sharing and discussing with friends; (2) joining private class; and (3) listening to music or watching videos. Every student has their own strategies and the different ways to overcome their obstacles in construct their English vocabulary mastery. The students can be said good language learners if they can find their own ways to improve their mastery. If they can find effective ways to increase their ability, they can also understand what they want to learn easily and well.

Vocabulary acquisition plays an important role in mastering a language. Insufficient vocabulary mastery may prevent maximum language performance. (Yang, 1997) pointed out that many college students with limited vocabulary size encountered difficulties in reading their English textbooks. In more specific context the English Education Department students have the same problem in this case. They are demanded to master vocabulary in order to help them dealing with academic campus life such as reading textbooks. Yet, they encountered some problems and at the same time come up with some strategies.

Some points of the strategies seem to be general strategies in learning, they are practicing and discussing with friends, listening to music or watching videos, and joining private class. (Renandya, 2020) questioned whether vocabulary as a knowledge or ability. In this article, he stated that one of exposure when vocabulary is seen as ability is by extensive listening and viewing for example by watching YouTube. This provides implicit learning process that enables students to learn deeper and complex language in use rather than the language form.

CONCLUSION

As mentioned previously, the present study was conducted to find out what the obstacles that are faced by second semester students of English Education Department of Universitas Muria Kudus in learning English vocabulary. It can be concluded that there are some obstacles faced by the students in learning English vocabulary, they are: (1) difficulty in identifying the English words' spelling and sounds; (2) difficulty in figuring out meaning of English words or sentences. (3) difficulty in using vocabulary in a context properly; (4) difficulty to understand the connotation of the English word well. Responding to the obstacles, the students' strategies are joining private class, discussing with friends, listening and watching videos.

The implication of this finding is that the vocabulary teaching has to be well designed by following the principles of teaching vocabulary to really meet the students' need in order to minimize the obstacles that might emerge. The right positive belief toward vocabulary teaching is also crucial for teachers and students to see that vocabulary is not only knowledge but also ability. By keeping this in mind, the most relevant strategy that is listening and watching videos is very acceptable as an effort to learn the vocabulary in deeper and more complex. Yet, no single strategy fits all, another strategy like consulting to the dictionary might be the last resort.

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