TEACHING VOCABULARY IN INDONESIAN EFL CLASSROOMS: A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY OF JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STRATEGIES, CHALLENGES, AND STUDENT RESPONSES

Al Ikhsan[1*]
[1*]English Education Department, STKIP Paracendekia NW Sumbawa

Article Info

Abstract

This study investigates the strategies used by junior high school English teachers in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, to teach vocabulary in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms. It also explores the pedagogical challenges they encounter and students' responses to these instructional methods. Adopting a qualitative case study design, the research draws on classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with two teachers and six students from one public and one private school. The findings reveal a range of strategies, including mind mapping, translation tasks, mobile-assisted tools, and picture-based learning. However, their implementation varied, with student-centered and technology-enhanced methods leading to greater engagement and vocabulary retention. Key challenges included students' difficulty memorizing words, low motivation, and disparities in digital proficiency between teachers and learners. The study highlights the importance of adaptive, context-sensitive pedagogy and suggests the need for greater institutional support for teacher training and technological integration. These findings offer practical implications for improving vocabulary instruction in similar EFL contexts.

✉ Corresponding author:
Email Address: alikhsan7495@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary knowledge is a fundamental component of language proficiency and plays a pivotal role in learners' ability to communicate effectively. In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), a strong vocabulary base enables students to comprehend texts, express ideas, and engage in both spoken and written interactions. According to Nation (2001), vocabulary acquisition is essential for all four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Learners with limited vocabulary often struggle to understand academic content, access global information, and participate in meaningful communication (Richards, 2000).

In Indonesia, English is taught as a compulsory subject from junior high school onward. However, many students continue to demonstrate low proficiency in vocabulary acquisition. This challenge may stem not only from the inherent difficulty of memorizing unfamiliar words but also from the pedagogical strategies employed in classrooms. Research has shown that monotonous, teacher-centered instruction can lead to reduced student motivation and engagement (Amelia & Nurmaily, 2021). Therefore, the selection and implementation of effective teaching strategies is critical to support vocabulary development in EFL learners.

Teachers play a central role in determining how vocabulary is introduced, practiced, and reinforced. The use of innovative, student-centered methods—such as semantic mapping (Udaya, 2021), visual aids (Octaberlina & Anggarini, 2020), and digital tools like WhatsApp (Jafari & Chalak, 2016)—has been associated with improved student outcomes. However, these approaches must be adapted to the learners' context, technological access, and cognitive readiness. Furthermore, disparities in student motivation, gender-based learning differences, and teacher digital literacy may influence the effectiveness of instructional strategies.

Despite the growing body of literature on vocabulary teaching techniques, there remains a gap in understanding how these strategies are applied in diverse school contexts, particularly in Indonesian junior high schools. Comparative research exploring both public and private school settings can offer valuable insights into how institutional factors shape teaching practices and student learning experiences.

This study investigates the strategies used by junior high school English teachers to teach vocabulary, the challenges they face in doing so, and how students respond to these methods. By examining two contrasting school environments, the research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of vocabulary instruction in real classroom settings. The findings are expected to inform teachers, curriculum developers, and policymakers seeking to enhance EFL instruction in Indonesia and similar educational contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. The Importance of Vocabulary in EFL Contexts

Vocabulary knowledge is widely acknowledged as a foundational element of language learning. As Nation (2001) asserts, without adequate vocabulary, learners cannot effectively comprehend or produce language. In EFL settings such as Indonesia, students often struggle with English due to a lack of vocabulary, which impedes their reading comprehension, writing fluency, and oral communication. This challenge underscores the need for strategic vocabulary instruction that supports not only word recognition but also word use in context (Schmitt, 2000).

2. Effective Strategies for Vocabulary Instruction

A wide range of instructional strategies have been studied to enhance vocabulary acquisition. One such method is semantic mapping, a technique that visually organizes lexical relationships to support

memory retention. Udaya (2021) found this strategy effective in helping junior high school students improve their vocabulary retention and recall through structured visual associations.

Another innovative approach is the integration of virtual reality (VR) in vocabulary instruction. Halimah et al. (2022) implemented VR-supported drilling strategies and found increased engagement and word retention among elementary students. Although promising, such digital methods require infrastructure that may not be available in all schools, particularly in low-resource settings.

Audio-visual media, especially videos, have also gained attention as tools for incidental vocabulary learning. Karami (2019) highlighted the role of video-based instruction in exposing learners to new vocabulary in authentic contexts. The multimodal nature of videos—combining audio, visual cues, and contextual dialogue—facilitates deeper cognitive processing and long-term retention.

Lastly, mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) tools, such as WhatsApp, have been used to enhance vocabulary learning outside the classroom. Jafari and Chalak (2016) reported that students using WhatsApp to share and discuss new words showed improved vocabulary acquisition and greater motivation.

3. Pedagogical Challenges in Vocabulary Teaching

Despite the availability of effective methods, teachers often encounter obstacles in vocabulary instruction. Amelia and Nurmaily (2021) note that repetitive and lecture-based teaching can lead to student boredom and disengagement. Moreover, Afidah and Machfudi (2022) found that memorization difficulties are a common barrier, particularly when students are not provided with contextual or interactive practice.

Motivation also plays a critical role in vocabulary learning. Ali and Abdulhalim (2023) emphasize that student enthusiasm is shaped by both intrinsic interest and the perceived relevance of learning activities. Without meaningful engagement, even effective strategies may fail to produce significant learning outcomes.

Teachers' technological proficiency can further influence their ability to implement modern strategies. As noted by Jannah (2023), educators with limited digital skills may struggle to adopt innovative tools, resulting in reliance on outdated methods. These challenges are often more pronounced in under-resourced schools or among older teaching staff.

4. Gaps in the Literature

Although various studies have examined vocabulary teaching strategies, there is a lack of comparative, qualitative research focusing on how these methods are applied in everyday classroom settings across different types of schools. Few studies explore how teachers adapt strategies based on contextual constraints, student characteristics, and institutional support.

This study aims to fill that gap by examining the vocabulary teaching strategies employed by English teachers in both public and private junior high schools in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. By incorporating

both teacher and student perspectives, the research offers a grounded understanding of what works, what doesn't, and why—providing practical implications for pedagogy and policy.

METHOD

1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative case study design to explore vocabulary teaching strategies used by English teachers in junior high schools, as well as the challenges they face and student responses to these strategies. A case study approach was selected to allow for an in-depth, contextually grounded examination of instructional practices in natural classroom settings (Creswell, 2014). This method is appropriate for capturing complex social phenomena such as teaching behavior, learner engagement, and pedagogical decision-making.

2. Research Setting and Participants

The research was conducted in two junior high schools in Yogyakarta, Indonesia—one public and one private. This comparative context enabled the researcher to examine potential differences in teaching strategies, institutional support, and learner experiences across school types.

Participants included:

- Two English teachers (one from each school), selected through purposive sampling based on their experience teaching vocabulary and willingness to participate.
- Six students (three from each school), chosen via criterion-based selection to ensure representation of diverse gender and academic performance profiles.

This small but targeted sample was designed to provide depth of insight rather than statistical generalizability.

3. Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and field notes, allowing for methodological triangulation.

- Interviews: Conducted with both teachers and students. The teacher interviews explored instructional strategies, perceived challenges, and pedagogical rationale. Student interviews focused on learning experiences, perceived effectiveness of strategies, and motivational factors. All interviews were conducted in Indonesian, recorded with participant consent, and later transcribed and translated into English for analysis.
- Observations: The researcher observed two full English class sessions per school, using an observation guide focused on teacher-student interaction, instructional methods, student engagement, and vocabulary-specific activities. Observations were non-participant in nature.
- Field Notes: Informal notes were taken during school visits and used to contextualize observed behaviors and responses.

4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic coding, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step model for qualitative analysis:

1. Familiarization with data
2. Generation of initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

To ensure reliability, inter-coder checking was conducted by a second reviewer for a subset of the interview transcripts. Member checking was also used by sharing summaries of key findings with participants for validation.

Themes were then organized around the three research questions:

1. What strategies are used by teachers to teach vocabulary?
2. What challenges do teachers face in vocabulary instruction?
3. How do students respond to the strategies used?

5. Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to ethical research practices. Participants were informed of the purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature of their involvement. Informed consent was obtained from all participants (and guardians for students under 18). Anonymity was ensured through the use of pseudonyms, and data were stored securely with restricted access.

RESULTS

This section presents findings organized around the study's three central research questions:

1. What strategies are used by teachers to teach vocabulary?
2. What challenges do teachers face in implementing vocabulary instruction?
3. How do students respond to the strategies used?

Data were derived from semi-structured interviews with two teachers and six students, as well as classroom observations conducted in two junior high schools in Yogyakarta—one public (School A) and one private (School B).

1. Strategies Used by Teachers to Teach Vocabulary

Both teachers demonstrated a range of vocabulary teaching strategies, though their approaches varied in scope, frequency, and engagement level.

Teacher A (School A) employed more traditional methods, including:

- Mind Mapping: Students created visual maps linking new vocabulary to related words or concepts.
- Memorization Tasks: Regular assignments required students to memorize new word lists.
- Translation Exercises: Sentences were translated between English and Indonesian to reinforce meaning.

However, classroom observations showed that only a subset of these strategies—primarily mind mapping and translation—were consistently implemented. Technological tools and interactive games were not observed, despite being mentioned in interviews.

In contrast, Teacher B (School B) incorporated more interactive and student-centered approaches:

- Use of WhatsApp: Students looked up unfamiliar words during lessons and shared meanings via a class group.
- Picture Cards: Used to associate words with visuals, aiding memory retention.
- Word Games and Discussions: Implemented when students showed signs of boredom to maintain engagement.

Teacher B's strategy use was more adaptive, with observed shifts based on student reactions and lesson flow. This flexibility aligned closely with student preferences and appeared to sustain higher classroom participation.

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2. Challenges Faced by Teachers in Vocabulary Instruction

Both teachers reported several recurring challenges in teaching vocabulary, which were confirmed by classroom observations and student feedback.

a. Difficulty in Memorization

Both teachers noted that students often struggled to retain new words. As Teacher A explained:

"Even after repeated exercises, many students forget words from previous lessons. It's like they reset every week."

This concern was echoed by students. One remarked:

"I try to memorize, but the words don't stay unless we use them again."

b. Low Student Motivation

Teacher A cited a lack of enthusiasm among students, particularly during memorization-focused lessons. Observation confirmed this: several students appeared disengaged, with minimal participation unless directly prompted.

c. Technological Limitations and Teacher Readiness

Teacher A also reported difficulty integrating digital tools due to limited personal proficiency:

"I know other teachers use apps and videos, but I don't feel confident with those tools."

In contrast, Teacher B's familiarity with digital platforms allowed more varied strategies. However, he noted that not all students had equal digital access or ability, especially when required to use personal devices for learning.

d. Gender-Based Learning Differences

Both teachers observed differences in vocabulary acquisition by gender, with female students generally perceived as more attentive and verbal. However, this was anecdotal and not systematically assessed.

e. Limited Stimuli at Lesson Start

Teacher B highlighted the importance of engaging "stimuli" (e.g., prompts or games) to capture students' attention early in the lesson. Without this, students were reportedly slow to engage.

3. Student Responses to Vocabulary Teaching Strategies

Student responses to the instructional strategies varied by school and teacher.

a. Motivation and Enjoyment

Students at School B reported greater enjoyment and perceived learning benefits, especially when activities involved real-life contexts or use of mobile phones:

"I like when we search vocabulary using our phones. It feels more like real life, not just school," said one student (SB5).

In contrast, several students from School A described the lessons as repetitive or difficult:

"Even though the teacher gives us new words, I still forget. It's hard to memorize so many at once," noted student SA3.

b. Perceived Usefulness of Strategies

Half the students mentioned translation and memorization tasks as moderately helpful but demanding. Others preferred interactive methods, such as discussions and visual aids, which they found easier to follow and more memorable.

c. Classroom Behavior and Engagement

Observation showed more active participation in School B, where the teacher alternated strategies and allowed use of digital tools. Students asked more questions and volunteered answers. In contrast, at School A, engagement was lower, with several students needing teacher prompts to respond or participate.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explore the strategies used by English teachers to teach vocabulary in junior high schools, the challenges they encounter, and how students respond to those strategies. The findings reveal important patterns and contextual nuances that deepen our understanding of vocabulary instruction in EFL settings.

1. Teacher Strategies Reflect a Spectrum of Engagement

The study confirms that vocabulary instruction varies significantly across classroom contexts. While both teachers employed multiple strategies—such as mind mapping, translation, word games, digital tools, and picture cards—their implementation fidelity differed.

Teacher B's adaptive approach, characterized by integrating technology (e.g., WhatsApp), visual prompts, and learner-driven tasks, aligns with research advocating for student-centered vocabulary instruction (Karami, 2019; Jafari & Chalak, 2016). These methods were more effective in sustaining student attention and promoting vocabulary retention, supporting the idea that engagement is a prerequisite for vocabulary acquisition (Nation, 2001).

Conversely, Teacher A's reliance on more traditional, teacher-led techniques (memorization and translation) appeared less effective in maintaining motivation. This echoes findings from Amelia and Nurmaily (2021), who argue that rote memorization without contextual application can hinder vocabulary development in EFL learners.

2. Challenges Underscore Structural and Pedagogical Constraints

Despite their best efforts, both teachers reported common obstacles, most notably students' difficulty in memorizing words, a challenge consistently echoed by students. This reinforces prior research suggesting that vocabulary retention is fragile unless accompanied by repetition, contextualization, and usage opportunities (Schmitt, 2000).

Low motivation, especially among students taught with static, lecture-based strategies, emerged as a critical barrier. This aligns with Afidah and Machfudi (2022), who observed that vocabulary learning success is closely tied to how personally relevant and interactive the learning experience is.

Furthermore, digital literacy gaps among teachers, as seen with Teacher A, limited the use of modern instructional tools. As Jannah (2023) notes, such limitations are common among older educators and can lead to stagnation in pedagogical innovation, particularly in under-resourced schools. In contrast, Teacher B's comfort with technology allowed him to leverage mobile platforms like WhatsApp—highlighting the importance of ongoing teacher professional development in digital pedagogy.

Gender-based learning differences were also noted, with teachers perceiving girls as more responsive and verbal. While anecdotal, this perception resonates with broader studies on gendered engagement patterns in language learning, though further empirical validation would be needed in this context.

3. Student Responses Highlight the Need for Differentiated Instruction

Students' responses offered valuable insight into how different strategies impact their learning experience. Those exposed to interactive, personalized, or tech-assisted strategies were more likely to report positive emotions, engagement, and perceived progress. For instance, students at School B cited the relevance of vocabulary to their everyday life and enjoyed using mobile phones as part of learning—suggesting that authenticity and autonomy are central to effective vocabulary instruction.

Students from School A, however, expressed frustration with memorization-based tasks, despite acknowledging the teacher's effort. This discrepancy points to a potential misalignment between instructional delivery and learner preferences, an issue that teachers must regularly assess and adjust for.

4. Implications for Practice and Policy

This study underscores the need for EFL teachers to adopt flexible, multimodal, and student-responsive vocabulary strategies. Schools should support teachers in:

- Gaining technological proficiency
- Applying formative assessments to tailor vocabulary instruction
- Facilitating peer learning and collaborative tasks to reinforce vocabulary in context

At the policy level, investment in professional development, especially for veteran teachers, can bridge generational gaps in pedagogical approaches. Additionally, ensuring equitable access to digital learning tools is essential for sustaining effective vocabulary instruction in both public and private schools.

5. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study's small sample size (two schools, eight participants) limits its generalizability. Nonetheless, it offers rich, qualitative insights into classroom dynamics. Future research should:

- Include a larger sample across diverse regions
- Incorporate pre- and post-testing of vocabulary acquisition
- Examine longitudinal impacts of specific instructional strategies

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the vocabulary teaching strategies employed by English teachers in two junior high schools in Yogyakarta, along with the challenges they faced and the students' responses to these methods. The findings reveal that while both teachers utilized a range of strategies—including mind mapping, memorization, translation, picture cards, and mobile-assisted tools—their effectiveness varied depending on how the strategies were implemented and adapted to student needs.

Teachers who integrated technology, contextual examples, and student-centered methods (e.g., Teacher B) observed greater learner engagement and more positive student responses. In contrast, more traditional and rigid approaches (e.g., memorization and lecture-heavy instruction used by Teacher A) led to lower motivation and persistent difficulties in vocabulary retention.

The challenges identified—such as low motivation, limited memorization ability, teacher digital literacy gaps, and contextual constraints—underscore the need for targeted teacher training and pedagogical support. Students emphasized the importance of relevance, interaction, and flexibility in how vocabulary is introduced and practiced.

This research contributes to the growing body of literature emphasizing that effective vocabulary instruction in EFL classrooms requires more than a list of strategies; it demands thoughtful adaptation to learners' cognitive, emotional, and technological realities. Future efforts in teacher development, curriculum design, and school policy should prioritize dynamic, inclusive, and resource-conscious approaches to vocabulary teaching.

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