

DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED BY ENGLISH TEACHERS IN TEACHING VOCABULARIES

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ABSTRACT

This study aims at identifying some difficulties encountered by English teachers in teaching vocabulary and finding out the solutions. The design used was qualitative descriptive using a semi-structured interview as the instrument. The study showed that common difficulties encountered in teaching vocabulary are students' and teachers' limited knowledge of the words, techniques, time constraint, and word selection. To overcome those difficulties, teachers may employ some techniques in teaching vocabulary such as using translation in L1, picture, real objects, gestures, guessing from the context, drilling, repetition, and using dictionary. Thus, it can be concluded that difficulties in teaching vocabulary lead English teachers to some ways they can take to overcome them. For future studies, it is suggested to employ observation to see the practice of vocabulary teaching and find out what the actual difficulties are encountered. Moreover, interview to students might be carried out to see their own difficulties in learning vocabulary.

Keywords: *English teaching, vocabulary, difficulties, techniques*

Sari

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi beberapa kesulitan yang dihadapi oleh guru bahasa Inggris dalam mengajarkan kosakata dan menemukan solusinya. Desain penelitian yang digunakan adalah kualitatif deskriptif dengan menggunakan interviu semi-struktur sebagai instrument. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa kesulitan yang dihadapi adalah kurangnya pemahaman siswa dan guru terhadap kosakata, teknik yang digunakan, waktu, dan pemilihan kosakata. Oleh karena itu, guru disarankan untuk menggunakan berbagai teknik dalam mengajarkan kosakata seperti menggunakan penerjemahan dalam bahasa ibu, gambar, objek asli, gerakan, menerka konteks, latihan, pengulangan, dan menggunakan kamus. Dapat disimpulkan bahwa kesulitan dalam pengajaran kosakata mengakibatkan guru mencoba menemukan cara untuk mengatasinya. Untuk penelitian selanjutnya disarankan untuk menggunakan observasi untuk melihat praktik pengajaran kosakata dan kesulitan yang sebenarnya dihadapi. Adapun interviu kepada siswa baiknya dilakukan juga untuk mengetahui kesulitan mereka dalam mempelajari kosakata.

Kata kunci: *pengajaran bahasa Inggris, kosakata, kesulitan, teknik*

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Introduction

One of the elements of a language is vocabulary. When it comes to the word vocabulary, people are likely to think about a list of words. Vocabulary is more than just a list of words. It is rather the knowledge of words and the word meanings (Raphael, 2009). One's size of vocabulary matters, but what matters most is how one uses it (Buckland, 2008). Besides having a large size of vocabulary, it would be better if one knows how to use it well. The meanings of words often appear many and complex. Thus, English teachers need to take that into account in order to teach vocabulary to their students. Experienced teachers of English language will know exactly how crucial vocabulary is (Allen, 1983). Moreover, they would know that students should master thousands of words used by English speakers and writers.

During the period 1940-1970, vocabulary teaching got a little attention (Allen, 1983). Teachers were focused on teaching grammar and pronunciation. Moreover, vocabulary took too much time in language classrooms. There was also a fear that students would make many mistakes in constructing sentences if they learned too many words before learning basic grammar first. Moreover, there was some who advised that students can *only* learn word meanings through experience, not to be taught in the class. Consequently, teachers were convinced that it was not necessary to teach much vocabulary.

Presently, vocabulary teaching gets more attention. Teaching vocabulary becomes one of the most discussed topics in teaching English as a foreign language since it is crucial. English teachers have devoted much time to teach vocabulary but they got unsatisfying results (Allen, 1983). Moreover, a number of studies have shown that lexical problems affect communication. Vocabulary teaching should also not be delayed though students have not mastered grammar. Thus, there is a need to teach vocabulary in order to supports students' language acquisition. Yet, when it comes to teaching and learning

processes, teachers would likely encounter problems from students, themselves, or even other factors.

Since teaching vocabulary is considered important, Nation (1974) believed that teachers need to teach the meanings of words *in context* – not from lists of unrelated words. He suggested three things in teaching vocabulary such as: (1) the form of the word, (2) the meaning of the word, and (3) the form and the meaning of the word go together. Moreover, Allen (1983) suggested the teachers can show the meanings of the words in three ways: pictures, explanations in students' own language, and simple definitions in English using vocabulary they already know. Furthermore, (Brown, 2000) exemplified some guidelines in teaching vocabulary such as: (1) giving specific time to learn vocabulary; (2) supporting students to learn vocabulary in context; (3) training students to accept the word they learn; (4) motivating students to improve their strategies to deduce the meaning of words; and (5) providing students with the meaning of the words they ask.

In the practice of vocabulary teaching, there could be issues, challenges, or difficulties. Beltrán (2001) tried to investigate some problems in teaching vocabulary such as incapability to find incorrect vocabulary that has been taught, using vocabulary in a meaningless way, incorrect use of dictionary, incorrect use of grammatical form, spelling, pronunciation, or stress. Thus, she suggested that teachers need to select the words carefully, and think how they are going to lead their students to an understanding. Further, she stated that students' own process of learning should be considered in order to make learning effectively. Meanwhile, Hiebert and Kamil (2005) pointed out four main issues in vocabulary teaching such as the number of words that should be taught, the particular words that should be taught, the vocabulary learning of two groups of students (English-Language Learners and potentially at-risk students); and the role of independent reading in vocabulary learning. Sedita (2005) tried to highlight some problems encountered by English teachers in developing sufficient vocabulary in school (e.g. some types of students that became challenge to successful vocabulary development). The challenge seemed to happen if the students are lack of knowledge of English, do not read outside of school, have reading and learning disabilities, and are

lack or vocabulary knowledge. She, thus, suggested that teachers should find kinds of vocabulary instruction and use technology that assists their vocabulary teaching. Whereas, Dastjerdi and Amiryousefi (2010) stated that one should concern about what it is to know a word and how to teach a word. They showed that in teaching vocabulary, students, mostly low-level students, are often frustrated in learning the words by guessing meaning from the context since it does not really result in long-term retention. Later, he suggested that teachers need to emphasize some appropriate techniques based on students' needs, levels, and educational backgrounds.

Brewster, Ellis, and Girard (1992) as cited in Alqahtani (2015) recommended several techniques in teaching vocabulary such as: *using objects* (visual aids, realia, and demonstration) to help students remember words better; *drawing* to help understand the words; using illustrations and pictures to help students understand the meanings of unknown words; contrasting the words to explain the word meanings; enumeration (a group of items, for example the word "clothes" can be explained by saying a number of clothes such as shirt, trousers, etc.) to help students understand what clothes mean; gestures to make the lesson dynamic; guessing from context to encourage students to learn independently to guess the word meanings they do not know; and using translation when encountering incidental vocabulary and to check students' comprehension. Considering the ways to teach vocabulary, teachers can employ those techniques to engage students in the learning. Moreover, they need to design activities to encourage students to give attention to the word and make them aware of it as an individual item (Nation, 2005).

Accordingly, the studies revealed that teaching vocabulary turned to be problematic to teachers due to many factors. So that, teachers should come up with solutions to overcome their difficulties in teaching vocabulary. Considering the previous studies; thus, this present study tried to identify some difficulties encountered by English teachers in teaching vocabulary seen from three factors: students, teachers, and other factors (time constraint and word selection).

Methods

Design

The design used was a qualitative descriptive. Qualitative is a kind of designs that is conducted in order to understand a phenomenon or individuals (Zacharias, 2012). Sullivan-Bolyai, Bova and Harper (2005) as cited in Mendez-Shannon (2010, p. 32) stated,

“the goal of qualitative description is not thick description (ethnography), theory development (grounded theory) or interpretative meaning of an experience (phenomenology) but a rich description of the experience depicted in easily understood language.”

Thus, this design was chosen because the study tried to investigate the topic about the difficulties encountered by English teachers in teaching vocabulary and how they solved the difficulties they faced.

Participants

Eighteen students at one of the universities in Indonesia were voluntarily involved in this study. They worked as English teachers either in state and private primary or secondary schools in big city in west java and other cities in Indonesia.

Data collection technique

A semi-structured interview was employed since it was to seek more information on a particular topic and to understand completely the answers provided (Harrell and Bradley, 2009). This type of interview seemed to be the best way to unpack the difficulties encountered by English teachers in teaching vocabulary.

Data Analysis

of the present study is based on Miles and Huberman (1984) interactive model: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification.

Results and Discussion

The difficulties encountered in teaching vocabulary

According to the data obtained, the difficulties English teachers encountered in teaching vocabulary can be seen from three factors: students, teachers, and other factors.

Students' limited knowledge of the meaning of words and pronunciation

The data showed that mostly the difficulties English teachers encountered in teaching vocabulary come from their students. Eight out of 18 participants had quite similar responses that their difficulties are from students' limited knowledge in knowing the meanings of the words and how to pronounce the words correctly. Some of them stated, "Students are not familiar with the words, and they do not know the definitions." The result is in accordance with Sedita (2005) that one of the challenges in vocabulary teaching is students' limited knowledge of the meaning of words. If students do not have sufficient knowledge of the word meanings, they will fail to comprehend texts they read.

Additionally, pronunciation can be a problem in vocabulary teaching. Some participants stated, "I face difficulty that students are really hard to pronounce the words." English teachers may encounter their students find it difficult to pronounce the words correctly. This may happen since they do not know about phonetic symbols. Harmer (2007) emphasized that it is important to teach phonetic symbols to students in order to make them able to pronounce the words. Thus, teachers need to consider pronunciation when they teach vocabulary.

Students' poor memorization and learning motivation

Eight participants reported that their students were easy to forget the words they had already learned and felt demotivated in learning vocabulary. Six out of the eight participants had quite similar responses about their students' memorizing skill towards their vocabulary teaching. They revealed, "It deals with memorizing... when I want to recall the words they have learned, they simply neglect it and do not try to remember the words... they are hard to remember the words." Forgetting mostly occurs soon after students learn new words (Griffin, 1992, as cited in Nation (2005)). Thus, teachers need to put attention to this. Students need to be trained to memorize words. According to Shen (2003), "memorization is important for vocabulary learning: if words cannot be remembered. Few are likely to be produced properly." Therefore, memorization is necessary when students learn vocabulary.

Additionally, learning motivation can be a challenge too. Two participants said, “The students are not interested in learning vocabulary... some of the students feel demotivated in the learning.” This may happen when the activities designed in teaching vocabulary are not interesting to students. Moreover, environment where they practice the words sometimes does not support their vocabulary development.

Astika (2015, p. 125) stated,

“An acquisition-poor EFL context may be found in school contexts in Indonesia. Such an environment cannot provide learners with adequate opportunity to use English they learn in class. This condition, in turn, may weaken their motivation to develop communicative skills because their language learning outside the class is not socially functional; hence their vocabulary development may be diminishing.”

Since vocabulary development is a long-term process, students need to find good environments in order to practice the words they learn in their class; otherwise, they will feel bored, inattentive, and demotivated to develop their vocabulary knowledge. Dastjerdi and Amiryousefi (2010) also found that students, mostly low-level students, are often frustrated in learning the words by guessing meaning from the context since it does not really result in long-term retention. Thus, teachers need to employ some appropriate techniques based on students’ needs, levels, and educational backgrounds.

Teachers’ limited knowledge of the words and techniques

The data showed that two participants believed that the difficulties come from their limited knowledge of the words and techniques. One participant stated, “Sometimes I face difficulties in teaching vocabulary when I cannot relate the words to the contextual meanings. So I will end up defining the words in native language.” Meanwhile the other one said, “Sometimes I just cannot explain the meanings to students so I will just translate it.” Translating the words into students’ native language seems to be the last choice they have. It can be seen that they could not find what techniques they could use to explain the words. “In some situations, translation could be effective for teachers when dealing with incidental vocabulary” (Thornbury, 2002, as cited in Alqahtani, 2015). Dastjerdi and Amiryousefi (2010) stated that one should concern about what it is

to know a word and how to teach a word. Thus, they need to anticipate the troubles with equipping themselves with sufficient knowledge of the words and appropriate techniques other than translation before teaching vocabulary.

Other factors: time constraint and word selection in learning materials

Time constraint

One of the participants stated, “I got no enough time to teach vocabulary for some particular topics.” What this participant revealed is in line with what Hunt and Beglar (2005) and Schmitt (2008) stated as cited in Astika (2015). They believed that one of the challenges teachers might face in classroom practice is an insufficient amount of time. By having insufficient amount of time, English teachers cannot teach vocabulary effectively because vocabulary teaching needs some attention (Brown, 2000). Further, Brown stated that teachers need to take into account to allocate specific class time to vocabulary learning. It means that vocabulary learning and teaching need some particular specific time in the class because teachers and students are required to devote some attention to the words.

Word selection in learning materials

One participant stated, “Sometimes when the topic contains many technical terms, I face some problems in explaining to my students.” Meanwhile, another participant revealed, “When I give students some texts containing technical terms, students will get confused and I need to define the words.” It can be seen that English teachers may encounter difficulties when many technical words contained in the learning materials. This is in accordance with (Hiebert, and Kamil, 2005) who believed that selecting words to be taught is one of the issues in vocabulary teaching. It will affect learning efficiency and effectiveness in the classroom. Fisher and Blachnowicz (2005) as cited in Buckland (2008) also recommended that teachers should select the words carefully for their planned teaching and reinforcement in order to support vocabulary development. If learning materials contain many difficult words, both teachers and students may encounter problems in vocabulary learning and teaching. Thus, they need to take into account in selecting what words they should select carefully to teach to their students.

The ways to overcome difficulties in teaching vocabulary

Providing 'vocabulary of the day' or 'vocabulary of the week' program

A half of the participants stated that they have a program called 'vocabulary of the day' or 'weekly vocabulary' for their students. Four of them specifically revealed that they give five to ten new words along with the definitions in order to make them learn independently after they explain the words. They stated, "I give five to ten words every day for students to practice... mostly it is based on the topic of our lesson." The "word of the day" or "vocabulary of the day" or "weekly vocabulary" program is one of practical classroom ideas to support vocabulary development. Buckland (2008, p. 9) stated, "By encouraging 'word of the day', you and the pupils identify a new word each day and attempt to use it in context as many times as possible." Thus, teachers may allocate some time for 'vocabulary of the day' or 'weekly vocabulary' because it may encourage students to practice the words effectively and independently.

Meanwhile, the rest of the participants stated that they did not have the "vocabulary of the day" program. Some of them said, "I don't provide any specific time for vocabulary of the day, sometimes I give new vocabulary only when students need it." They did not provide the vocabulary of the day program because they believed that when they presented new materials, at the same time students would learn new words. Thus, it can be seen that it is not necessarily important for them to provide specific time to make a "vocabulary of the day" program for their students because most of the times it is context dependence.

Checking students' understanding after teaching new vocabulary

Reviewing the words students have learned is really important in vocabulary teaching because it will show us students' comprehension. The data reveals that all participants stated that they check their students' understanding. Eight out of 18 participants check their students' understanding by asking them to define the words, mime the words, guess the meanings from the context, play games, and do speaking activity.

Checking students' understanding of vocabulary can be in the form of questioning students to do some tasks in guided reading and writing (Buckland, 2008). In line with

what (Buckland, 2008) suggested, the rest of the participants reported that they checked their students' understanding by giving a writing task. They asked their students to write sentences by using new words they have learned. By giving a writing task, they believed that they could see how far their students' understanding of vocabulary they have learned in the learning.

Using translation in first language (L1)

Seen from the data, two out of 18 participants reported using translation in L1 when encountering difficulty in explaining the meanings in English. Allen (1983) pointed out that teachers can define words in students' first language if they are young learners. However, Mehta (2009) spoke against the use of translation. Further, he suggested that teachers should avoid using translation since it may or may not provide the word meanings precisely. Thus, when it comes to the choice whether teachers should translate the words in L1 or avoid the translation, they need to consider students' levels. If they are dealing with low-level students, it is accepted to translate the words into L1.

Giving word games

Three out of 18 participants reported that they used word games to solve their problems in vocabulary teaching. One of the participants stated, "My students like to play games, so sometimes I use guessing game to overcome my problems in teaching vocabulary to them." It means that they found games useful since it help them encounter their problems they face in the process of teaching vocabulary. This is in line with Harmer (2007) who recommended the use of word games in the classroom practice to keep the class going. Additionally, Buckland (2008, p. 11) believed that "playing word games is to extend and challenge understanding of vocabulary." Thus, teachers can use word games to engage and encourage students to develop vocabulary during independent tasks, and overcome their difficulties in vocabulary teaching.

Using pictures, drawings, realia, and flashcards

It is reported that three out of 18 participants used pictures, drawings, realia, and flashcards in order to explain the words to their students and expect them to remember the meanings of words better. This is in accordance with Allen (1983) who believed that

in order to assist students in understanding the word meanings, teachers find that a picture is effective when it is noticeable by all students in the classroom. Further, she explained that real objects (realia) are better than pictures if they are available in the class. Additionally, realia are very meaningful to show the word meanings (Mehta, 2009).

Repetition

Repetition improves vocabulary acquisition. Repetition is important for vocabulary learning and teaching because there is so much that students need to know about each word learned in order to use it contextually (Nation, 2005). In line with what Nation said, five out of 18 participants tried to repeat the words many times to their students to anticipate forgetting. Griffin (1992) as cited in Nation (2005) stated that most forgetting is likely to happen after students learn new words. Since students may forget the words after learning, they try to do repetition as many as possible so they can recall the words they have learned fluently and communicatively.

Using dictionary

One participant reported that he asked his students to use dictionary in the learning when they did not understand the meanings. Harmer (2007) believed that the use of dictionary is useful because it is rich in information about words, the meanings, the forms, etc. However, it is suggested that teachers need to apply some rules when it comes to dictionary use in the learning to anticipate overuse.

Giving rewards

One participant reported giving rewards to her students to motivate them in vocabulary learning. However, it would be better if she could find another way to motivate their students instead of giving rewards. She might use some creative techniques in teaching vocabulary to build her student's learning motivation.

Based on the results and discussion above, it can be stated that those English teachers encountered some challenges in teaching vocabulary to their students. The challenges could be viewed from three ways which are the students, the teachers themselves, and

other factors such as time constraint and word selection to teach. However, those challenges could be overcome by employing some techniques such as providing vocabulary program, checking students' understanding of the words learned, repeating the words, using translation, using pictures, and so on.

Conclusion & recommendation

First, the difficulties lie in students' limited knowledge of the words and pronunciation. It is believed that insufficient knowledge of the words may lead to poor reading comprehension. Moreover, poor memorization and learning motivation affect too. Second, difficulties come from teachers themselves. And third, time constraint and word selection in learning materials become the obstacles too.

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Biography

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