



CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

A. Background of Problem

Proficiency in the English language involves the attainment of four different, but related, competencies in communication, which include listening, speaking, reading, and writing. This is because these competencies work as an integral system where improvement in one helps improve others as well. Thus, according to Hidayad & Purwanto (2022: 179), the same importance needs to be accorded to all these competencies in the process of learning. Mastering the four core skills of English requires proficiency in certain areas, including vocabulary, which is one of the key components as stated by Rahmawati et al. (2023: 10).

In addition, Vocabulary also part of fundamental aspect of language acquisition. Andriani and Sriwahyuningsih (2019: 170) stated that one of the keys to studying English is vocabulary and without it, learners cannot speak, write, listen, or even read. A language system derives its communicative function from the collection of meaningful lexical items it contains, which is commonly referred to as vocabulary. When arranged into coherent units, these words produce meaningful sentences that serve as tools for communication.

Language proficiency entails vocabulary knowledge to a large extent because vocabulary knowledge forms the basis for developing other language skills. Vocabulary knowledge goes beyond the mere identification and understanding of vocabulary items but entails the use of such vocabulary items appropriately in communication. The above view holds true because vocabulary



knowledge does not entail individual words but is part of an extensive lexical network. Rahmah et al. (2023:36) observed that the meaning of a lexical item arises from its use and its relationship with other words. This is also explained by Arrasul et al. (2023: 58).

In the study from Afidah and Machfudi (2022: 2) also explain that vocabulary comprehension constitutes a crucial aspect of English learning. Students with strong vocabulary mastery are able to develop effective writing skills. Furthermore, in terms of speaking, they can convey information clearly, and in listening, they are better equipped to receive and process input. In addition, these skills enable learners to communicate proficiently in English.

Vocabulary knowledge is one of the key aspects in the acquisition of language that helps in obtaining proficiency in English. However, even with its significance, building a robust vocabulary is a tough task for many learners. The interpretation of the context of an English sentence becomes a major problem to many students during their learning process. According to Komalasari (2022:275), the lack of understanding of the context impacts different areas of language ability.

As pointed by Susanto (2021: 49), Students encounter several obstacles in acquiring English vocabulary, such as the differences between spoken and written forms, The huge number of words that must be mastered, and the limited availability of reliable learning materials, often hinder progress. Moreover, vocabulary knowledge requires not only understanding dictionary definitions but also grasping grammatical aspects and correct usage.

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As found out by the observations done by the researcher in the Teaching Practicum Program (PPL), the learners at SMPN 3 Tembilahan Hulu often faced problems in recognizing and remembering the basic English vocabulary. The constraints in the learning process came with pronunciation errors due to the great difference in the phonology of English and the learners' native language. Many of them still unfamiliar with the English alphabet and demonstrated limitations in recognizing basic vocabulary. These challenges are believed to be related to their educational background in elementary school, where English was not formally taught due to curriculum policy. It is not uncommon for students to struggle in understanding the teacher's explanations.

The researcher selected eighth grade students as participants because they are at a stage of language development where they are no longer at the basic introductory level (such as in 7th grade), but also have not yet experienced the pressure of final exams (such as in 9th grade). Considering the significance of enhancing vocabulary acquisition skills of junior high school learners, the current research was conducted to explore the difficulties experienced by students in acquiring English vocabulary. This research is called "A Descriptive Study on Students' Difficulties in Mastering English Vocabulary at SMPN 3 Tembilahan Hulu Academic Year 2026/2027." The objective of this research is to gather empirical data which could help promote further development in the field of English language teaching through providing better ways of teaching vocabulary. Being young learners, who are forming their vocabulary in English, these students are suitable for research.

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B. Identification of the Problem

Based on this research background, the problems addressed in this study are identified as follows:

1. Difficulty in recognizing basic vocabulary, students face challenges in identifying simple English words.
2. Problems in reading and pronunciation, students struggle to read and articulate English vocabulary correctly, which hinders their comprehension and communication.
3. Low comprehension of basic words, even the simplest vocabulary items are not understood.

C. Limitation of the Program

In order to make sure that the investigation is kept on track, the study limits its scope to the difficulties the eighth graders faced in learning vocabulary at SMP Negeri 3 Tembilahan Hulu in academic year 2026/2027.

D. Research Question

With regard to the scope as outlined above, the research aims at addressing the following research question: "What are the difficulties faced by eighth grade students of SMP Negeri 3 Tembilahan Hulu in learning English vocabulary for the academic year 2026/2027?"

E. Purpose of the Research

Main purpose of this research is to investigate and understand the challenges faced by the students of class VIII of SMP Negeri 3 Tembilahan Hulu during the year 2026/2027 related to vocabulary proficiency.



F. Significance of the Research

The findings of this study are expected to be able to give benefits to the teacher, the student, the reader.

1. For students

It is expected that the findings will make the students aware of those issues that prevent them from acquiring vocabulary and that will enable them to identify the difficulties they encounter in the course of learning.

2. For teacher

This research may give teachers some empirical data about students' difficulties in learning vocabulary, thus allowing them to develop more effective approaches to vocabulary teaching.

3. For future researchers

The findings of the above study will act as literature support for future studies, and at the same time add to knowledge and research experience on English language teaching, especially vocabulary instruction.

G. Definition of the Key Terms

1. Difficulty

In terms of education, learning difficulties involve situations where students face hurdles which inhibit the learning process. As defined by the Longman Dictionary, as quoted by Irvani (2020, p. 8), difficulty entails a problem or situation which causes obstacles. On a broader scope, Hartatiningsih (2022, p. 304) elaborated on this term by defining difficulties as problems faced by the



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students in mastering vocabulary, which include inaccurate spelling, pronunciations, and inappropriate word choice.

2. Vocabulary

Vocabulary is an important aspect of English language learning, as it enables learners to develop language abilities. The vocabulary is not regarded as just a set of words; rather, it consists of lexical items that can be used in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In this respect, Rahmah et al. (2023:35) argued that the vocabulary is an important aspect that needs to be acquired by learners to enable English language proficiency development.

3. Vocabulary Mastery

In their study, Milawati et al. (2025: 243) stated that Vocabulary mastery involves a complex process requiring deep knowledge of the meaning and structure of words. However, the present study limits its scope to meaning and usage, as preliminary evidence showed that students struggled particularly with these components.