

Exploring Students' Perceptions of English Vocabulary Learning Difficulties

^{*1}Nazwa Meisya Amanda Putri, ²Darmawan, ³Mafulah

^{1,2}English Education Study Program, Tadulako University

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 October 2026

Revised 18 October 2026

Accepted 20 October 2026

Available online 24 October 2026

Keywords

students' perception, vocabulary learning, learning difficulties, qualitative research, EFL students



This is an open access article under the [CC BY-SA](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/) license.

Copyright © 2025 by Author. Published by Yayasan Daarul Huda

ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore students' perceptions of the difficulties they experience in learning English vocabulary at SMPN 7 Palu. The research employed a qualitative descriptive design to provide a clear and detailed understanding of students' experiences without manipulating variables. The participants of this study were 30 eighth-grade students selected through simple random sampling. Data were collected using a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire consisted of Likert-scale items and open-ended questions, while the interviews were conducted to gain deeper insights into students' responses. The data were analyzed using the interactive model proposed by Matthew Miles et al., which includes data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings reveal that students generally have positive perceptions toward learning English vocabulary. Most students show interest and motivation, especially when interactive teaching methods such as games, pictures, and videos are used. However, despite these positive attitudes, students still face several difficulties. The main challenges include remembering vocabulary, understanding certain

types of words such as tenses and adjectives, and experiencing anxiety during vocabulary tests. Limited exposure to English outside the classroom and lack of repetition were identified as major factors contributing to these difficulties. In addition, students' confidence varies depending on their familiarity with vocabulary. Students who practice more frequently tend to feel more confident, while those with limited practice feel less certain.

INTRODUCTION

English has become one of the most important languages in the world today. It is widely used as a means of international communication, access to information, and participation in global academic and professional contexts. David Crystal (2003) explains that English has developed into a global language that allows individuals from different countries to communicate and collaborate effectively. In the context of education, this global role makes English an essential subject to be learned by students in many countries, including Indonesia. As part of the national curriculum, English is taught as a compulsory subject at the junior high school level, with the expectation that students will develop basic communicative competence.

Despite its importance, many Indonesian students still face difficulties in mastering English, especially in vocabulary learning. Vocabulary is widely recognized as a fundamental component of language proficiency. Paul Nation (2001) emphasizes that vocabulary knowledge is the foundation of all language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Without sufficient vocabulary, students may struggle to understand texts, express their ideas clearly, and participate actively in classroom interactions. This indicates that vocabulary is not only a supporting element but also a core aspect that determines overall language ability.

However, learning vocabulary is not a simple process. It involves not only memorizing word meanings but also understanding pronunciation, spelling, and contextual usage. Many students find vocabulary learning difficult because they are required to remember a large number of words while also being able to use them appropriately in different contexts. In addition, vocabulary learning often requires repeated exposure and practice, which may not

*Corresponding Author

e-mail: nazwameisyaamandaputri@gmail.com

always occur in classroom settings. As a result, students tend to forget words easily and feel frustrated when they cannot recall them during communication.

The challenges in vocabulary learning are influenced by both linguistic and psychological factors. From a psychological perspective, learners' emotions and attitudes play a crucial role in determining their success. Elaine Horwitz (1987) highlights that anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and negative self-perceptions can reduce students' willingness to participate in language learning activities. When students feel anxious, they are more likely to avoid speaking or engaging with new vocabulary. This condition is closely related to the Affective Filter Hypothesis proposed by Stephen Krashen, which suggests that a high affective filter—caused by low motivation or high anxiety—can block language input and hinder language acquisition.

In addition, motivation and attitude are key factors in vocabulary learning. Robert Gardner (1985) argues that learners with positive attitudes and strong motivation are more likely to succeed in acquiring a second language. Students who are motivated tend to invest more effort in learning vocabulary, use various strategies, and persist even when they encounter difficulties. On the other hand, students with low motivation may show limited engagement and quickly give up when facing challenges.

Another important aspect in understanding vocabulary learning difficulties is students' perception. Learners' perceptions reflect how they interpret their learning experiences, including what they believe about the difficulty of vocabulary and their ability to learn it. According to Rebecca Oxford (1990), students' perceptions strongly influence their choice of learning strategies and their level of persistence. When students perceive vocabulary learning as difficult, they may develop negative attitudes and avoid engaging in vocabulary-related tasks. Conversely, positive perceptions can encourage active participation, strategy use, and confidence in learning.

In real classroom contexts, students' perceptions are shaped by various factors, such as teaching methods, classroom environment, and previous learning experiences. For example, if vocabulary is taught through repetitive memorization without meaningful context, students may feel bored and perceive it as difficult. On the other hand, interactive and contextualized teaching approaches can make vocabulary learning more meaningful and enjoyable. Therefore, understanding students' perceptions is essential for designing effective instructional strategies.

In the context of SMPN 7 Palu, vocabulary learning remains a significant challenge for eighth-grade students. Based on preliminary observation and informal discussion with the English teacher, several problems have been identified. Many students have difficulty recognizing new words, remembering their meanings, pronouncing them correctly, and using them in appropriate contexts. These difficulties indicate that students are not only struggling with vocabulary knowledge but also with vocabulary application.

Furthermore, students' limited exposure to English outside the classroom contributes to their learning difficulties. Unlike in environments where English is frequently used, students in this context rarely encounter English in their daily lives. As a result, they have fewer opportunities to practice and reinforce their vocabulary knowledge. This lack of exposure makes it more difficult for students to retain new words and develop automaticity in language use.

Another issue observed is students' low confidence in using English, especially in speaking activities. Many students are afraid of making mistakes or being judged by their peers. This fear reduces their willingness to practice vocabulary actively, which in turn limits their learning progress. Such conditions highlight the importance of addressing not only cognitive aspects of vocabulary learning but also affective factors such as confidence and anxiety.

Given these challenges, it is important to explore how students perceive their vocabulary learning difficulties. By understanding their perceptions, teachers can gain deeper insights into

the factors that hinder students' learning and identify strategies to address them. Students' perceptions can reveal whether the difficulties arise from linguistic complexity, teaching methods, lack of practice, or psychological barriers.

This study, therefore, aims to explore students' perceptions of English vocabulary learning difficulties among eighth-grade students at SMPN 7 Palu. The findings of this research are expected to provide valuable information for teachers in designing more effective and student-centered vocabulary instruction. By addressing students' perceived difficulties, teachers can create a more supportive learning environment that reduces anxiety, increases motivation, and promotes active engagement in vocabulary learning.

In addition, this study contributes to the broader field of English Language Teaching by highlighting the importance of learners' perspectives in understanding language learning challenges. While many studies focus on teaching methods and learning outcomes, fewer studies emphasize how students themselves perceive their learning difficulties. Therefore, this research fills an important gap by providing insights into students' experiences and beliefs regarding vocabulary learning.

In conclusion, vocabulary plays a central role in language learning, yet it remains a major challenge for many students. These challenges are influenced by a combination of linguistic, psychological, and contextual factors. Understanding students' perceptions is a crucial step in addressing these challenges and improving vocabulary instruction. Through this study, it is that more effective and meaningful strategies can be developed to support students in mastering English vocabulary and achieving better language proficiency.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to explore students' perceptions of the difficulties they experience in learning English vocabulary. Qualitative descriptive research aims to provide a clear and straightforward description of a phenomenon based on participants' real experiences without manipulating variables or imposing complex interpretations. As explained by Lambert and Lambert (2012), this approach focuses on presenting data in a natural way by using participants' own words as the primary source of meaning. This design was considered appropriate because the present study seeks to understand how eighth-grade students at SMPN 7 Palu perceive their challenges in vocabulary learning, including their feelings, beliefs, and experiences. Rather than testing hypotheses, the researcher aimed to capture a rich description of students' perspectives in their real classroom context.

The population of this study consisted of all eighth-grade students at SMPN 7 Palu, totaling 161 students distributed across six classes (VIII A to VIII F). These students represent a typical junior high school context where English is taught as a compulsory subject. From this population, a sample was selected using Simple Random Sampling (SRS). This sampling technique allows every member of the population to have an equal chance of being selected without considering specific characteristics. In this study, five students were randomly chosen from each class, resulting in a total sample of 30 students. This approach ensured that the data represented diverse student perspectives while maintaining manageability for in-depth qualitative analysis.

To collect the data, two main instruments were used: a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The questionnaire consisted of Likert-scale items and several open-ended questions designed to explore students' perceptions and difficulties in learning English vocabulary. The Likert-scale items helped identify general trends in students' responses, while the open-ended questions allowed participants to express their opinions in their own words. According to Louis Cohen et al. (2018), questionnaires are useful tools for capturing participants'

views and providing descriptive data that can support qualitative interpretation. The questionnaire in this study focused on key aspects such as students' difficulties in understanding word meanings, remembering vocabulary, pronouncing words, and using vocabulary in context.

In addition to the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain deeper insights into students' responses. Semi-structured interviews allow flexibility for the researcher to ask follow-up questions based on participants' answers, enabling a more detailed exploration of their experiences. As stated by John Creswell (2014), this type of interview is effective in qualitative research because it provides opportunities to explore participants' perspectives more comprehensively. The interview questions were aligned with the themes of the questionnaire to ensure consistency and relevance. Through these interviews, the researcher was able to clarify ambiguous responses and capture more detailed explanations of students' vocabulary learning difficulties.

Before being used in the study, both instruments were validated through expert judgment. The validation process involved consultation with an English teacher and a lecturer who specializes in qualitative research. Their feedback focused on the clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of the items. Based on their suggestions, several revisions were made to improve the instruments, ensuring that the questions were understandable and aligned with the research objectives. This step was important to enhance the validity and reliability of the data collected.

The data collection procedures were conducted in several stages. First, the researcher obtained official permission from the school principal and the English teacher to carry out the study. Ethical considerations were carefully addressed by informing participants about the purpose of the research, ensuring confidentiality, and obtaining their voluntary consent. Students were assured that their responses would be used only for research purposes and would not affect their academic evaluation.

Second, the questionnaire was distributed to the selected students. They were asked to respond honestly based on their personal experiences in learning English vocabulary. The researcher supervised the process to ensure that all participants completed the questionnaire independently without external influence. This step helped ensure the authenticity of the data.

Third, after reviewing the questionnaire results, several students were selected for follow-up interviews. These students were chosen based on the variety and depth of their responses to ensure a comprehensive understanding of different perspectives. The interviews were conducted in a comfortable setting to encourage students to express their thoughts freely. With participants' permission, the interviews were recorded to ensure accurate data transcription and analysis.

Finally, triangulation was applied to enhance the credibility of the findings. This was done by comparing and cross-checking data obtained from the questionnaire and interviews. According to Lexy Moleong (2017), triangulation is an important technique in qualitative research to ensure data validity by examining consistency across different data sources. By combining multiple sources of data, the researcher was able to strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings.

The data analysis in this study followed the interactive model proposed by Matthew Miles et al. (2014), which includes three main stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. In the first stage, data condensation, the researcher organized and simplified the raw data obtained from questionnaires and interview transcripts. The data were grouped into thematic categories such as difficulties in understanding meaning, pronunciation problems, memory issues, and lack of confidence.

In the second stage, data display, the condensed data were presented in the form of descriptive narratives and tables. This step helped the researcher identify patterns and

relationships among the themes. Presenting the data visually and systematically made it easier to interpret students' perceptions and highlight key findings.

The final stage was conclusion drawing and verification. In this stage, the researcher interpreted the data and developed conclusions based on the identified patterns. The conclusions were continuously checked against the data to ensure their accuracy and consistency. This iterative process helped ensure that the findings were firmly grounded in the participants' actual responses.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the criteria proposed by Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba (1985) were applied. Credibility was achieved through triangulation and member checking, where participants were given opportunities to confirm the accuracy of the interpretations. Dependability was ensured by maintaining consistent documentation of all research procedures. Confirmability was addressed by maintaining researcher neutrality and ensuring that interpretations were based solely on the data provided by participants.

RESULT

This section presents the findings of the study conducted at SMPN 7 Palu based on two primary data sources: questionnaire responses and semi-structured interviews. The findings aim to describe students' perceptions of their difficulties in learning English vocabulary. A total of 30 eighth-grade students participated in the questionnaire, while interviews were conducted with selected student representatives to gain deeper insights into their experiences.

Questionnaire Findings

The questionnaire results reveal that students generally have positive perceptions toward learning English vocabulary, although they still face several challenges. The overall responses show that out of 300 total responses (10 items × 30 students), 179 responses (59.7%) fall into the positive category (strongly agree and agree), 84 responses (28%) are neutral, and only 37 responses (12.3%) fall into the negative category (disagree and strongly disagree). This indicates that most students show a favorable attitude toward vocabulary learning.

To provide a clearer summary of the findings, the key questionnaire results are presented in the table below:

Table 1. Summary of Students' Perceptions on Vocabulary Learning

Aspect of Perception	Strongly Agree + Agree	Neutral	Disagree + Strongly Disagree	Interpretation
Interest in learning vocabulary	83.3%	13.3%	3.3%	Very positive
Perceived difficulty of vocabulary	60%	26.7%	13.3%	Moderately difficult
Forgetting vocabulary	50%	30%	20%	Common problem
Enjoyment through games	80%	13.3%	6.6%	Highly engaging
Learning with media (pictures/flashcards)	70%	20%	10%	Effective strategy
Anxiety during tests	60%	33.3%	6.7%	Moderate anxiety
Vocabulary helps speaking	70%	20%	10%	Strong belief

From the table above, it can be seen that students' interest in learning vocabulary is very high. In Item 1, 83.3% of students stated that they like learning English vocabulary. This indicates that students are not resistant to vocabulary learning; instead, they are motivated and open to learning new words. Similarly, Item 6 shows that 80% of students enjoy learning vocabulary through games. This suggests that interactive and engaging teaching strategies play an important role in increasing students' motivation.

Another important finding is related to the use of learning media. In Item 7, 70% of students agreed that they learn vocabulary better when teachers use pictures or flashcards. This indicates that visual aids help students understand and remember vocabulary more effectively. These results highlight the importance of using varied and interactive teaching methods in vocabulary instruction.

Despite these positive attitudes, the findings also reveal several difficulties experienced by students. In Item 3, 60% of students agreed that learning English vocabulary is difficult. This suggests that although students are interested in learning vocabulary, they still perceive it as a challenging task. One of the main difficulties is related to memory. In Item 5, 50% of students admitted that they often forget the meaning of words they have learned. This indicates that vocabulary retention remains a significant problem.

In addition, affective factors such as anxiety also play a role in students' difficulties. In Item 8, 60% of students reported feeling nervous during vocabulary tests. This shows that students experience a certain level of anxiety when they are required to recall vocabulary in formal situations. This anxiety may affect their performance and confidence.

Overall, the questionnaire findings show a combination of positive perceptions and existing challenges. Students are motivated and interested in learning vocabulary, especially when interactive methods are used. However, they still face difficulties related to memory, perceived difficulty, and anxiety.

Interview Findings

The interview results provide deeper insights into students' experiences and support the questionnaire findings. In general, students expressed positive feelings toward learning English vocabulary. They described the learning process as enjoyable, interesting, and helpful. One student mentioned that learning vocabulary is exciting because it introduces new knowledge, while another stated that the teacher's explanation makes the material easier to understand. These responses confirm that students have a positive attitude toward vocabulary learning.

However, students also identified specific types of vocabulary that they find difficult. Two students mentioned that vocabulary related to past and future forms is challenging because it can be confusing. Another student stated that adjectives are difficult due to the large number of words and similar meanings. This indicates that both grammar-related vocabulary and descriptive vocabulary are common sources of difficulty.

Memory problems were consistently mentioned by all interview participants. Students admitted that they often forget new vocabulary after learning it. One reason for this is the lack of exposure to English in daily life. Since English is not commonly used outside the classroom, students have limited opportunities to practice and reinforce their vocabulary. Another reason is the lack of repetition. Students explained that without regular practice, they tend to forget the words they have learned.

Students' confidence in using vocabulary varies. Some students feel confident when they understand and frequently practice the vocabulary. However, others feel less confident because

they are unsure about how to use words correctly in sentences. This suggests that confidence is closely related to students' level of understanding and familiarity with the vocabulary.

In terms of learning strategies, students reported using different methods. Some prefer memorization and repeated reading, while others find watching videos and listening to English songs more effective. These strategies indicate that students have different learning preferences and benefit from varied instructional approaches.

The role of the teacher was also highlighted as an important factor. Students stated that the use of videos, pictures, games, and quizzes helps them understand vocabulary better. These methods make the learning process more engaging and less boring. This finding supports the questionnaire result that interactive learning strategies are highly preferred by students.

Peer support showed mixed results. Some students felt that their classmates could not help much because they also struggle with English. However, others mentioned that friends can be helpful when they are more capable. This suggests that peer learning depends on the overall proficiency level of the class.

Another important finding is related to students' emotional responses. When students forget vocabulary, they often feel confused, nervous, and afraid of making mistakes. These feelings indicate that vocabulary learning is not only a cognitive process but also an emotional experience. Anxiety and fear can influence students' participation and performance in class.

Finally, students suggested that vocabulary learning should be made more enjoyable through the use of engaging media such as videos and games. They also emphasized the importance of practicing more frequently, watching English content, and studying regularly. These suggestions show that students are aware of the strategies that can help them improve their vocabulary mastery.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that students at SMPN 7 Palu generally have positive perceptions toward learning English vocabulary, although they still experience several challenges. These results reflect the complex nature of vocabulary learning, which involves not only cognitive processes but also affective and contextual factors.

The dominance of positive responses in the questionnaire indicates that students are interested in learning vocabulary and recognize its importance. This finding is consistent with the theory proposed by Paul Nation (2001), who states that vocabulary is the foundation of all language skills. Students' belief that vocabulary helps them improve their speaking ability further supports this idea. When learners understand the importance of vocabulary, they are more likely to engage actively in the learning process. In addition, the high level of interest suggests that the classroom environment and teaching strategies may already support positive learning attitudes.

However, despite this positive perception, many students still consider vocabulary learning difficult. This finding aligns with Scott Thornbury (2002), who explains that vocabulary learning is not simply about memorizing words but also involves understanding meaning, usage, and context. The students' difficulty in remembering vocabulary indicates that they may not yet have developed effective strategies for long-term retention. This problem is also supported by the interview results, where students mentioned lack of repetition and limited exposure as key factors. Without frequent use and reinforcement, vocabulary is easily forgotten.

Another important issue identified in this study is students' anxiety, particularly during vocabulary tests. A significant number of students reported feeling nervous when recalling vocabulary. This finding can be explained by the Affective Filter Hypothesis proposed by Stephen Krashen, which suggests that negative emotions such as anxiety can hinder language acquisition.

When students feel anxious, their ability to process and recall information decreases, which may negatively affect their performance. Therefore, reducing anxiety in the classroom is essential to support effective vocabulary learning.

The findings also highlight the importance of teaching strategies. Students showed strong preferences for interactive methods such as games, pictures, videos, and flashcards. These strategies make learning more engaging and help students understand vocabulary more easily. This supports the view of Rebecca Oxford (1990), who emphasizes that appropriate learning strategies can improve students' engagement and learning outcomes. The use of multimedia and interactive activities not only enhances understanding but also increases motivation and reduces boredom.

Furthermore, the interview results reveal that students have different learning preferences. Some prefer memorization and repetition, while others benefit more from audiovisual materials such as songs and videos. This suggests that teachers should apply varied instructional approaches to accommodate different learning styles. A single teaching method may not be effective for all students, so flexibility in teaching is important.

Another key finding is related to students' confidence. The study shows that confidence varies depending on students' familiarity with vocabulary. Students who frequently practice and understand vocabulary tend to feel more confident, while those who lack practice feel unsure and hesitant. This supports Robert Gardner (1985), who argues that motivation and self-confidence play important roles in language learning success. Building students' confidence requires continuous practice, supportive feedback, and a safe learning environment.

Finally, limited exposure to English outside the classroom was identified as a major factor affecting vocabulary learning. Since students rarely use English in daily life, they have fewer opportunities to practice and reinforce their knowledge. This condition makes it difficult for them to retain vocabulary and use it effectively. Therefore, encouraging students to engage with English outside the classroom, such as through watching videos or listening to songs, can help improve their vocabulary mastery.

In conclusion, the findings of this study demonstrate that vocabulary learning is influenced by multiple factors, including students' perceptions, emotions, learning strategies, and learning environment. While students show positive attitudes, challenges such as memory retention, anxiety, and limited exposure still need to be addressed. Effective teaching strategies and supportive learning environments are essential to help students overcome these difficulties and improve their vocabulary skills

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study conducted at SMPN 7 Palu, it can be concluded that eighth-grade students generally have positive perceptions toward learning English vocabulary. Most students show interest and motivation in learning new words, especially when engaging and interactive teaching methods such as games, pictures, videos, and quizzes are used. These methods help create a more enjoyable learning environment and support students' understanding of vocabulary.

However, despite their positive attitudes, students still face several significant difficulties. One of the main challenges is remembering vocabulary. Many students reported that they often forget the meaning of words due to limited repetition and lack of exposure to English outside the classroom. In addition, certain types of vocabulary, such as past and future forms as well as adjectives, are perceived as difficult because they can be confusing and require deeper

understanding. These findings indicate that vocabulary learning is not only about memorization but also about understanding meaning and context.

Another important issue identified in this study is students' anxiety, especially during vocabulary tests. Many students feel nervous and afraid of making mistakes when recalling vocabulary. This emotional factor affects their confidence and performance in learning English. Students' confidence also varies depending on their level of familiarity and practice with vocabulary. Those who practice more tend to feel more confident, while those with limited practice feel less certain in using vocabulary.

Overall, this study highlights that vocabulary learning is influenced by cognitive, affective, and environmental factors. Although students have positive perceptions, challenges such as memory retention, anxiety, and limited exposure still need to be addressed. Therefore, it is important for teachers to apply varied and interactive teaching strategies, provide more opportunities for practice, and create a supportive learning environment. By doing so, students can improve their vocabulary mastery and develop better English language skills.

REFERENCES

- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research methods in education* (8th ed.). Routledge.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Crystal, D. (2003). *English as a global language* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Gardner, R. C. (1985). *Social psychology and second language learning: The role of attitudes and motivation*. Edward Arnold.
- Horwitz, E. K. (1987). Surveying student beliefs about language learning. *Foreign Language Annals*, 20(5), 439–445.
- Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Pergamon.
- Lambert, V. A., & Lambert, C. E. (2012). Qualitative descriptive research: An acceptable design. *Pacific Rim International Journal of Nursing Research*, 16(4), 255–256.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE Publications.
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Moleong, L. J. (2017). *Metodologi penelitian kualitatif*. PT Remaja Rosdakarya.
- Nation, I. S. P. (2001). *Learning vocabulary in another language*. Cambridge University Press.
- Oxford, R. L. (1990). *Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know*. Heinle & Heinle.
- Thornbury, S. (2002). *How to teach vocabulary*. Longman.