

PROBLEMS AND PRACTICAL NEEDS IN LEARNING VOCABULARY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzed the problems and practical needs of English vocabulary learning among low-score students at a state university in Mataram, Lombok, Indonesia. To provide appropriate instructional materials, learning tasks, or assessment tasks, a need analysis of the student's prior knowledge is the most important thing that should be done by a teacher. The research involved forty students and used qualitative methods, including questionnaires and interviews, to collect data. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive qualitative methods, such as data reduction, display, analysis, and conclusion. The results of this study show that there are problems in vocabulary learning faced by students such as problems with inaccurate pronunciation, problems in knowing the meaning of too much vocabulary, problems in dealing with grammatical alterations, and problems in using words appropriately. On the other hand, students' practical needs are engaging in learning with interactive activities in the form of games/discussions in class, practicing the words adequately, and asking for feedback for better learning improvement. Future research can further examine overcoming the problems found by linking them directly to practical needs.

Keywords: *Problems, Learning Vocabulary, Practical Needs.*

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INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary mastery plays a significant role in raising English language proficiency, as it allows individuals to generate ideas, comprehend the meaning of words, and fluently interact with others. Vocabulary is crucial for English use at the institute/school, workplace, and everyday life. Proficiency in vocabulary is an essential requirement for success in a language and is the key factor in the development of highly responsive and productive skills (Panjaitan, et al., 2024). Learners need to be able to express ideas and expression through listening, speaking, reading, and writing. To increase vocabulary, students need excellent guidance and appropriate learning strategies. Vocabulary acquisition strategies are a group of gestures, manners, processes, or techniques that students use to find and organize lexical components such as words, definitions, and forms. Since several aspects of studying the English language need vocabulary in order to understand its meaning, students who have good vocabulary-learning strategies can readily understand what they have previously studied. They ought to examine English-language books, watch English-subtitled movies, listen to English music or the radio, and so on to increase their vocabulary. (Teng, 2014; Takac, 2008).

In English as a foreign language such as in Indonesia, learning vocabulary is the most important activity that should be exposed to the students. However,

although the learning vocabulary is distributed into two credits in the university in which this research was conducted, some students were indicated to have problems with English vocabulary learning in many of them got C grades. To overcome their problems and meet their needs, lecturers need to know their problems and assess their practical demands. According to Zhou (2011), teachers must be aware of their students' preferred learning styles to adjust or adapt their instruction and provide the most relevant and interesting activities. Teachers may create meaningful learning, inspire students to study, and assist them in developing abilities that they can use in practical situations by knowing how students can use the knowledge and skills they acquire in their daily lives. These needs are variously required in academic performance. Research by Zamzam et al. (2024) found a significant gap in critical and creative literacy (CCL) skills emphasizing the need to integrate CCL skills into the EFL curriculum in higher education. The participants expressed a strong need for critical and creative skills to improve their academic performance.

For each student to have a productive learning experience, it is essential first to determine their practical needs. By knowing the student's needs, it will be easier to adjust the learning materials that should be at their level and what materials should be taught. When adjustments have been made to teaching materials and methods, students will find it easier to learn, which in this case, the students will certainly master the vocabulary for the needs of English learning. Appropriate steps determine the level of teaching success that is beneficial for students and teachers themselves, where students' activeness will also increase as a result of their better understanding. Thus, this study was to identify the problems and the needs of the students in learning vocabulary in the English Education Program at a state university in Mataram, Indonesia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vocabulary problems

Problem-solving involves identifying and characterizing an issue, which is crucial for achieving consensus and achieving goals. Learning vocabulary is an essential aspect of problem-solving, as it helps students demonstrate proficiency in English language usage. Teachers must address students' difficulties in acquiring vocabulary, suggest vocabulary-learning techniques, and provide opportunities for learning new words.

There are some problems in vocabulary learning that students frequently face as stated by Thornbury (2002), i.e. pronunciation, spelling, meaning, grammar, length and complexity, range, connotation, and idiomaticity. Accurate pronunciation is essential for proficiency, but students often struggle with words with unfamiliar sounds. Spelling difficulties can disrupt students' learning process, with silent letters like foreign and listen being particularly difficult. Understanding the meaning of English words can be challenging, as students struggle to accurately interpret sentences due to unclear and contradictory meanings. Grammar can also be challenging, especially if a verb comes after an infinitive or an *ing* form. Longer and more complicated words can be difficult to recall, especially when learning a language for the first time. Another problem in learning vocabulary is uncertainty regarding the meanings of some terms can lead to issues, such as confusion between "propaganda" and "deviant." Colloquial

phrases and colloquial phrases can be harder to understand than clear-cut ones. Addressing these problems can help students master vocabulary for all language skills efficiently and purposefully.

Further, Gower (1995) explains that vocabulary difficulty can be attributed to factors such as similarity to the first language, familiarity with already-known English words, connotation, spelling and pronunciation, multi-word items, collocation, appropriate use, and understanding the formal or casual style of a word or phrase. These factors can make vocabulary easier or difficult for students, as they may struggle to understand the meanings of words and their connotations. Spelling and pronunciation can also be problematic, as students may struggle with specific spelling patterns. Multi-word items, such as compound nouns or phrasal verbs, can be particularly challenging for English language learners. Additionally, proper use of vocabulary and idioms is crucial for effective communication.

Practical needs on vocabulary

Learning strategies are specific ideas or methods people employ to absorb, interpret, and remember new information (Ehrman & Oxford, 1990). Practical needs are the processes of gathering information to create strategies specific to the individual learning demands of each learner. In general terms, practical needs also known as need analysis, refers to the procedures involved in obtaining data that will form the foundation for creating resources that will address the learning requirements of a certain student body. They are essential for establishing goals and deciding on programs or organizational improvements. It is crucial to properly introduce a needs analysis activity so that students recognize the significance of their work and take the necessary time to do it (Scrivener, 2011). Mastering vocabulary is crucial for language acquisition, especially for beginning learners who need to quickly learn new words. Practice is key to mastering new words, and the selection and application of appropriate methods are necessary due to the complexity and difficulty of vocabulary acquisition. Furthermore, this practice of mastering words is in line with the theory by Lewis (1978) states that the only true way to learn a new word is to use it.

Teachers can teach students vocabulary learning strategies focusing on context-based learning. The main source of vocabulary learning is context, but there is still a debate about how well students can manage context independently. Gu (2003) points out that the two main goals of vocabulary learning strategies should be to increase word knowledge and develop the ability to employ that word knowledge effectively. To effectively adjust learning strategies, teachers must consider personal needs, such as materials, topics, pace, activities, teaching approaches, individual learners' treatment, skills, interaction patterns, and types of feedback.

As stated by Spratt et al. (2011), learners of foreign languages have a variety of needs that affect their ability to learn. Learning needs include materials and topics, activities, interaction patterns, teaching approaches, language and skills, level of language and skills, learning strategies, and workload. Understanding these needs is crucial for effective language learning and teaching. Supporting the interactive activities by Spratt, stated that the use of enjoyable games and activities to teach vocabulary, along with the wash-back effect that has been shown in numerous studies, has helped many students overcome their

humiliation and become more engaged in the process of constructing meaning (Honarmand & Rostampour 2015).

RESEARCH METHOD

The study used a qualitative approach as the research design to discover the problems and the practical needs of the second-semester students in learning vocabulary. The students reported to have low scores in vocabulary courses in their first semester in the English department at the University of Mataram were involved in this study and there were 40 students who participated in responding to the questionnaire and 5 of them were invited for the interview. The questionnaire with 20 questions was distributed through Google Forms which stated the question consisted of the problems and practical needs of the students. The semi-structured interviews with 5 questions were conducted face-to-face in order to get more data to support the participant's answers to the questionnaire

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The findings of this study were obtained from the questionnaires and interviews. The students' responses to questions strongly agree and agree responses are categorized as positive, while those who disagree and strongly disagree responses are categorized as negative responses. Further, the students' responses to the open-ended questionnaire and the interview are presented to support the findings from the questionnaire.

Problem in Linguistic-Based

Table 1. Problems in Lexical Associative

NO	STATEMENTS	POSITIVE			NEGATIVE		
		SA	A	Total	D	SD	Total
1	I faced problems in learning vocabulary because I didn't try to remember words by the way they sounded.	13.6%	59.1%	72.7%	25%	2.3%	27.7%
2	I faced problems in learning vocabulary because I didn't recognize the words by the accurate pronunciation.	11.4%	65.9%	77.3%	22.7%	0%	22.7%
3	I faced problems in learning vocabulary because I didn't try to remember how to spell words.	9.1%	34.1%	43.2%	52.3%	4.5%	56.8%
4	I faced problems in learning vocabulary because I didn't try to remember words by making language rules to connect them.	11.4%	61.4%	72.8%	27.3%	0%	27.3%
5	I faced problems in learning vocabulary because I didn't try to connect words to other words I already knew in my native/first language.	13.6%	59.1%	72.7%	25%	2.3%	25%
6	I faced problems in learning vocabulary because I didn't use keywords (words used to help us recall other words) to help me learn or remember words.	11.4%	61.4%	72.8%	27.3%	0%	27.3%

PROBLEMS AND PRACTICAL NEEDS
IN LEARNING VOCABULARY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The data in Table 4.1 show that the majority of students struggled with recognizing the words by the accurate pronunciation. In addition, students agreed that they have problems with language rules and the use of keywords when connecting words, and also agreed that they have problems with pronunciation to try to connect the words.

It is further supported by a participant's response from the interview which stated that;

“In learning the vocabulary, I found it difficult to remember new words and apply them appropriately in conversation. Sometimes I found that even though I could understand the meaning of the words while studying, it was difficult for me to apply them spontaneously in conversation.”

The participant explained that the weakness in learning vocabulary lies in the difficulty of remembering new words and their application in daily life. This is related to the blank when pronouncing the new words spontaneously.

Problem in Memory-Based

Table 2. Problem in Memory-Based

NO	STATEMENTS	POSITIVE			NEGATIVE		
		SA	A	Total	D	SD	Total
1	I faced problems in learning vocabulary because I didn't practice vocabulary by describing the meaning of words.	15.9%	50%	65.9%	34.1%	0%	34.1%
2	I faced problems in learning vocabulary because I didn't write down vocabulary notes to know the meaning of the words (when I studied alone, in class, etc.).	18.2%	36.4%	54.6%	31.8%	13.6%	45.4%
3	I faced problems in learning vocabulary because I didn't review words or my notes repeatedly over time.	18.2%	59.1%	77.3%	22.7%	0%	22.7%
4	I faced problems in learning vocabulary because I didn't review the meaning of the words in study groups or with others.	18.2%	59.1%	77.3%	22.7%	0%	22.7%

The study reveals that students' negative responses to the statements are less than positive, with the majority facing problems in memory-based vocabulary understanding. The students often struggle with understanding word meanings and do not write down notes to understand them. The majority of students struggle with learning vocabulary due to the large amount of vocabulary in long texts, essays, and paragraphs. The study suggests that students' weaknesses in vocabulary learning are primarily due to the difficulty in understanding large-meaning vocabulary.

Problem in Productive-Based

Table 3. Problems in Productive-Based

NO	STATEMENTS	POSITIVE			NEGATIVE		
		SA	A	Total	D	SD	Total

NO	STATEMENTS	POSITIVE			NEGATIVE		
		SA	A	Total	D	SD	Total
1	I faced problems in learning vocabulary because I didn't use new words in a sentence to help me remember them.	9.1%	79.5%	88.6%	11.4%	0%	11.4%
2	I faced problems in learning vocabulary because I didn't use words over and over in similar situations to help me remember them.	18.2%	56.8%	75%	25%	0%	25%
3	I faced problems in learning vocabulary because I didn't connect the sounds of the new words and their pictures to help me remember them.	13.6%	54.5%	68.1%	29.5%	2.4%	31.9%

The study reveals that 40 participants face difficulties in learning vocabulary due to the lack of repetition in similar situations. The students' responses are categorized as positive, experiencing problems in using words appropriately. In an interview session, one participant stated that they find it difficult to remember new words and apply them spontaneously in conversation. This weakness is also related to the difficulty in using words appropriately in conversation, particularly the second and third verbs. The difficulty in word use makes it difficult for students to remember the words.

Practical Needs in Learning Vocabulary

Table 4. Practical Needs in Learning Vocabulary

NO	STATEMENTS	POSITIVE			NEGATIVE		
		SA	A	Total	D	SD	Total
14	Learning vocabulary would be easier if the strategy used by the lecturer is appropriate to my level which needs interactive activities or games in the class.	50%	50%	100%	0%	0%	0%
15	Learning vocabulary would be more helpful to me if the lecturer gave feedback or notes on the task so I would be more motivated to increase my score.	45.5%	52.3%	97.8%	2.2%	0%	2.2%
16	Learning vocabulary would be easier if the lecturer adjusted the learning styles by creating group work to get more discussion.	31.8%	52.3%	84.1%	15.9%	0%	15.9%

Ade Nurul Aida^{*1}, Lalu Thohir^{*2}, Ahmad Zamzam^{*3}
**PROBLEMS AND PRACTICAL NEEDS
 IN LEARNING VOCABULARY IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

NO	STATEMENTS	POSITIVE			NEGATIVE		
		SA	A	Total	D	SD	Total
17	Learning vocabulary would be more helpful if the speed (pace) of lessons adjusted the students' level of understanding in the class.	36.4%	59.1%	95.5%	2.25%	2.25%	4.5%
18	Learning vocabulary would be easier if the lecturer provided adequate practice to ensure better score adjustments.	34.1%	65.9%	100%	0%	0%	0%

The data shows that most of the students strongly agree that they need a strategy that suits their learning level, such as interactive activities or games, along with adequate practice, to improve their vocabulary scores. Interactive activities like games and discussions attract students' interest and attention, making vocabulary learning more enjoyable and faster. Feedback from lecturers helps identify shortcomings and areas of weakness, enabling self-evaluation and self-improvement. Individual feedback is necessary to increase the desire to be more active in learning vocabulary. Group work is also needed to make vocabulary learning easier, with a total agreement of 84.1%.

Further, the findings from the questionnaire (open-ended questions) asking about what helped the students most in learning vocabulary show that interactive classroom lessons, such as games, stories, movies, and songs, are the most effective methods for improving vocabulary knowledge. Note-taking adequate practice and repetition of newly learned vocabulary are found to be beneficial.

Discussion

The results of data analysis obtained from the percentage of questionnaires and interview answers show that this study corroborates previous studies. The majority of students' responses indicated that the students had difficulties with the linguistic component of learning vocabulary, followed by memory-based (knowing the meaning) and productive-based (using) problems. The students also agreed with the practical needs statement presented by the researcher.

Problems in Learning Vocabulary

In the problems dealing with knowing the meaning, the study reveals that second-semester students often struggle with remembering and memorizing vocabulary due to the overwhelming amount of vocabulary they must know. Thornbury's theory (2002) of vocabulary problems related to meaning suggests that students often struggle with understanding the meaning of English words, leading to unclear and contradictory meanings. This difficulty is exacerbated by the lack of practice on new vocabulary words, which can make it difficult for students to learn and remember the vocabulary itself. The majority of participants, 88.6%, agree and strongly agree that they have problems using new words in sentences, while 75% agree and strongly agree that they have problems remembering words because they do not continue to use them in appropriate

situations. Additionally, 68.1% agree and strongly agree that they have problems connecting the sound of new words with the picture, which can also contribute to difficulty in remembering vocabulary.

The study also highlights the importance of good practice in assisting students in understanding the meaning of vocabulary words. In conclusion, the findings support Thornbury's theory of vocabulary problems related to meaning, highlighting the need for students to practice and review vocabulary words to improve their learning progress.

In pronunciation problems, it was found that 77.3% of participants face problems in learning vocabulary due to inaccurate pronunciation, which makes it difficult to recognize words. This problem is classified as a problem in the aspect of lexical associative in linguistic-based vocabulary. Thornbury (2002) states that pronunciation inaccuracies can cause people to misunderstand or fail to recognize words. This study aligns with Thornbury's theory on pronunciation problems. Where students experience problems in learning vocabulary because of inaccurate pronunciation which makes it difficult to recognize a newly learned word.

Dealing with problems with grammar, this study supports Thornbury's theory (2002) that language rules can cause grammar problems, as students struggle to remember words that deviate from their original language counterparts. Results from questionnaires and interviews show that 72.8% of students experienced difficulties in learning vocabulary due to not trying to remember words using language rules. Participants also noted that the first, second, and irregular third verbs are difficult to remember due to their minimal changes. This research supports Thornbury's theory, as students struggle to connect words for use due to difficulties in remembering language rules or grammar changes.

Finally, regarding problems in using words, Gower (1995) in his theory reveals that another challenging aspect of language use is knowing when to use it. Likewise, the results obtained in data collection that reinforce this theory with results reaching 75-88% explain that students experience problems in using the word appropriately in a similar situation and a sentence. This makes it difficult for students to remember words because they have difficulty using them directly. This is also supported by the participant's answer in the interview which emphasizes that:

“In learning vocabulary, I find it difficult to remember new words and apply them appropriately in conversation....”

Practical Needs in Learning Vocabulary

Further, Spratt et al. (2011) explained that foreign language learners have various needs that affect their ability to learn. These needs are related to the adjustment of appropriate strategies by lecturers to the needs of students in learning vocabulary. Based on the findings of this study, the most common students' needs in learning vocabulary are learning activities accompanied by interactive activities, be it games, discussions, or quizzes. A study by Octaberlina & Rofiki (2021) found that all students believed that using SpellingCity could increase their vocabulary mastery and learning pronunciation, supporting the idea that utilizing this game can aid students in acquiring vocabulary. SpellingCity's user-friendly interface design is another reason why kids find the game appealing and straightforward to use. Regarding the quizzes, Setiawan & Wiedarti (2020) in

his study concluded that using the Quizlet application helps students become more motivated to study words. It is evident when one compares the outcomes of the two observation checklists. In addition, students who utilized the Quizlet application showed more motivation compared to those who did not. Conversely, when learning vocabulary through the Quizlet application, the majority of students were more engaged, enthusiastic, and did not get bored. In line with the study result which stated that in the progress of English language education, Duolingo continues to innovate in language learning using mobile devices. This duolingo has proven to raise students' scores when it comes to vocabulary development (Ajisoko (2020). Further, Spratt, et al. (2011) highlight the importance of interactive learning strategies for students, particularly those with personal needs—these strategies, whether group or individual discussions, help students learn vocabulary more effectively. The results of questionnaires and interviews show that students are more enthusiastic and interested in learning vocabulary through interactive activities. Using interactive activities, such as games, discussions, and quizzes, is highly beneficial for students in learning vocabulary, as they increase their enthusiasm and establish fun and challenging learning activities. Students will find it easier to recall the words they have learned or to develop long-term memory for them according to the game's unforgettable events. Yudha & Mandasari (2021) supported this by the result of their study which found that students will be motivated to acquire English vocabulary by engaging in games. Additionally, it promotes and strengthens teamwork. It is believed that in this instance, students' opinions regarding the enjoyable, engaging, difficult, and successful nature of teaching English vocabulary through games. These activities not only make learning more enjoyable but also improve vocabulary memory retention. This study is in line with the theory stated by Honarmand and Rostampour (2015) in which the use of enjoyable games and activities to teach vocabulary has helped many students overcome their humiliation and become more engaged in the process of constructing meaning.

In addition, learning practices are also in need that students can remember the new vocabulary they have learned. The students agreed that lack of practice greatly affected their recall of the vocabulary they learned. This is consistent with the questionnaire results with a total of 100% agreeing and strongly agreeing that if the lecturer provided adequate practice, learning vocabulary would be easier for the participants. So, it can be seen that this practice supports students to recall new words that have been memorized and learned to be used in real situations. In this case, Lewis (1978) stated that the only true way to learn a new word is to use it. It is also proven by the study done by Azim (2020) stated that teaching new lexical items and using already acquired ones repeatedly is one of the key components of vocabulary learning. Students can significantly improve their language learning success with the right guidance, practice, and expertise of educators (Jaikrishnan & Ismail, 2021).

Students also need feedback from the lecturer in order as beneficial in improving the learning progress. The learning provided by the lecturer is easy to understand and has provided modules as guidance. Spratt, et al. (2011) emphasize the importance of feedback in learning, as it helps students understand their understanding of the material. In this study, 97.8% of students stated that

feedback is crucial for vocabulary learning. Students in the interview stated that feedback helps identify weaknesses and shortcomings, enabling self-evaluation and further learning. The findings of this study are also evidenced by its compatibility with previous research from Fengyu (2023) which found the importance of accurate assessment and effective feedback to students in improving their learning experience. Good assessment and feedback can help provide a promising way for students to support their vocabulary mastery and increase their learning motivation.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

The second-semester students' problems in learning vocabulary can be categorized into linguistic-based, memory-based, and productive-based issues. In short, these problems are knowing the meaning of too much vocabulary, inaccurate pronunciation, dealing with grammatical alterations, and using words appropriately. Students also struggle to remember and apply the learned vocabulary in real conversation situations. Further, the students' practical needs in learning vocabulary include engaging in interactive learning activities, practicing the vocabulary adequately, and asking feedback on learning from lecturers to assess their achievement and understanding. These practical needs help students fulfill their learning needs and improve their vocabulary learning.

The researcher suggests that vocabulary is crucial for language learning, and students should focus on repetition and enjoyable practice to retain it. Teachers should use engaging methods, such as games or enjoyable word practice, to enhance students' English vocabulary skills. Additionally, providing memorable classes can further engage students. The researcher also encourages other researchers to contribute new research ideas to support the knowledge of vocabulary in language learning. The results of this study can serve as a valuable resource for further research, ensuring that students are motivated to improve their English vocabulary and enhance their abilities.

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