CHALLENGES FACED BY ENGLISH EDUCATION STUDENTS IN MASTERING VOCABULARY THROUGH ONLINE LEARNING SYSTEMS

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Abstract: Vocabulary is the primary skill EFL students need to speak English fluently. It is not as simple as one may think of learning English vocabulary by simply recalling words’ meanings and pronunciations; there are many other factors to consider as well, such as their usage and connotation. Therefore, this research aims to discover the difficulties English education students face in mastering English vocabulary during the online learning system and the factors underlying these difficulties. A descriptive design was used. Questionnaires, observations, and interviews were used as data collection techniques. The data analysis techniques used were Likert-scale analysis for quantitative data and condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. The results showed that students had linguistic difficulties, such as range, connotation, idiomaticity, length and complexity, pronunciation, grammar, and meaning. Based on these difficulties, there were linguistic and non-linguistic factors that underlie the challenges faced by students.

Keywords: English Education Students’ Difficulties, English Vocabulary, Online Learning

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INTRODUCTION
Vocabulary is an essential component of English and must be given special attention when learning English. According to Taratika (2021), to become proficient in English, one must first expand one’s vocabulary. Moreover, Munikasari et al. (2021) argued that all language abilities are supported more by vocabulary; learners who have a sufficiently large vocabulary will be able to read, write, talk, and listen well.

A vocabulary is a set of words containing the meaning that other words can be defined. According to Mamaghe et al. (2021), vocabulary is a collection of knowledge that discusses the meaning of words and how they can be formed in a language used to express specific meanings in a straightforward manner. According to Dakhi and Fitria (2019), there are two types of vocabulary: receptive vocabulary is a type of vocabulary knowledge at the level of recognizing the form of the vocabulary, its pronunciation, and its meaning, whereas productive vocabulary is a type of vocabulary knowledge at the level of producing
vocabulary, pronouncing vocabulary, and describing the substance with other words of the vocabulary based on personal understanding.

People who speak languages other than English as their mother tongue and want to learn English are called English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. When EFL students want to learn English successfully, they must be able to master all the components of the English language, such as grammar, tenses, functions, and vocabulary. However, in the eyes of the public, an EFL student who seems to have mastered the four English component abilities is perceived to be able to use the language well and fluently. EFL students must master vocabulary before they can practice and master the four abilities of speaking, writing, listening and reading. This is because vocabulary is the essential foundation for a person to learn English. Without vocabulary, people cannot communicate with other people, and their messages or information are not conveyed properly.

According to cases found in previous studies, the process of learning to master vocabulary is not easy for students. It takes great effort for students to master the new vocabulary they find, and there are many difficulties they encounter. It is known that when EFL students study English, differences can be found in it, such as the difficulties experienced by students during the vocabulary mastery process carried out in the face-to-face learning system, including difficulty pronouncing vocabulary, spelling vocabulary, understanding vocabulary meaning, remembering new vocabulary, and vocabulary use (Afidah & Machfudi, 2022; Anjarani & Sy, 2022; Reskiawan et al., 2020; Salam & Nurnisa, 2021; Susanto, 2021). According to Afidah and Machfudi (2022), the factors underlying students’ difficulties in mastering vocabulary are as follows: first, students feel reluctant to open the dictionary and look for the meaning of unknown vocabulary; second, they are less interested in learning English; third, they do not increase the duration of practicing speaking English; fourth, external factors, including the availability of inadequate facilities, are supported by the negative influence of friends, which makes it difficult for them to master vocabulary. Moreover, Susanto (2021) also found that several factors cause students’ difficulties in obtaining vocabulary, including because the writing of vocabulary is entirely different from the spoken form in English, the number of words that students must learn is large, and there are problems with sources of information regarding the vocabulary discussed. In addition, students lack vocabulary knowledge, grammatical understanding of vocabulary, and vocabulary pronunciation skills to master.

The Covid-19 pandemic in the last two years has made education less than optimal. This condition has brought excellent changes to almost all aspects of the world, including economic aspects, tourism, health, and education. The difference was that the transfer of the learning system that initially conducted face-to-face learning at school turned into face-to-face learning in a network at home. Not only experiencing the changes to the learning system, but the government has also even changed the temporary curriculum during the pandemic to a “Kurikulum Darurat.” Likewise, with the education system that applies to State Hindu University, I Gusti Bagus Sugriwa Denpasar. Both students and lecturers must be able to adapt to these situations. Starting from adapting to new learning techniques, new learning media, new learning atmosphere, and new influences on students’ mental learning. Facing these new conditions makes students face new difficulties in mastering vocabulary during the vocabulary course.

In the preliminary research we conducted, it was found through interviews with second-semester English students via Google Meet that there were difficulties experienced by students when mastering vocabulary during online learning in vocabulary courses. Interviews were conducted with five students who had the most problems in the General
Vocabulary course, who were assessed directly by the instructor who taught the class. However, it was not easy to master the vocabulary. Because the indications of the difficulties they face can make them unable to demonstrate their ability in the four main skills in English, they also feel self-doubting, afraid, and anxious to ask and answer questions from both the lecturer and friends when conducting class discussions. In this case, students could not see and assess their level of development in mastering vocabulary.

**RESEARCH METHOD**

**Research Design**

This study used a descriptive research design proposed by Boudah (2019). This approach was utilized to provide a quantitative and qualitative account of the results, ensuring that they are consistent with field data and reality. According to Suhartina et al. (2022), the goal of descriptive research is to present a precise and understandable picture of the reality.

**Research Participants**

The participants of this research is the second-semester students of the English Education Department at I Gusti Bagus Sugriwa Denpasar State Hindu University in the 2022-2023 academic year.

**Research Instruments**

The researchers used a questionnaire with close-ended questions that consisted of a 3 points Likert-Scale and 42 questions about students’ difficulties in mastering English vocabulary through online learning and the factors underlying the difficulties. After the results of the questionnaire were collected, the following data were collected through observation and interview guidelines. We observed and interviewed the students to support the questionnaire data.

**Data Collection**

This study used a questionnaire for the initial data collection, and in the first phase, the researchers sent the questionnaire to 80 students. After obtaining the results of the questionnaire analysis, moving on to the second phase where the observation sheets were used in this study to make observations of participants who showed that the results of the questionnaire were experiencing difficulties, the researcher obtained permission from the lecturer teaching in the class to make observations, which aimed to better ensure the results of the questionnaires obtained previously. Finally, the interview was used to dig deeper into the factors that underlie students’ difficulties in mastering English vocabulary through online learning, as shown in the results of the previous questionnaire analysis.
Two types of data analysis techniques were used in this research: the first was the technique of analyzing quantitative data. The researcher used a Likert Scale analysis to determine the grade to which respondents agreed or disagreed with a statement on a three-point scale. This concept was used on the interval scale.

**Data Analysis**

In analyzing the qualitative data, the researcher used data analysis according to Miles et al. (2014), which consists of the first data condensation, the second data display, and the third drawing and verifying the conclusion.

In the qualitative data analysis phase, data was collected first, then entered into data condensation, where the data will be filtered again to be selected which will be presented, after the data had been filtered, the data can be presented through data display, then conclusions were drawn. However, if the data had not been sufficiently determined, where several things must be added or filtered again, the following steps were repeated.
RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Results

Based on the results obtained from the questionnaire, the researcher presented the findings through the process of calculating and presenting the resulting data, as shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
<th>Percentages per Score Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Pronunciation</td>
<td>59.17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Spelling</td>
<td>38.75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Length and Complexity</td>
<td>62.92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Grammar</td>
<td>57.08%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Meaning</td>
<td>55.63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Range, connotation, and idiomaticity</td>
<td>66.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Self-Motivation</td>
<td>9.06%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>The ability to memorize vocabulary</td>
<td>43.13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Interest in mastering the vocabulary</td>
<td>3.75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Situations and conditions during the learning process</td>
<td>38.96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>The methods used in teaching vocabulary</td>
<td>5.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>The Environmental conditions around EFL students</td>
<td>25.83%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The questionnaire was filled out online via Google Form on April 30, 2023, by 80 students who met the criteria for being sampled. The recapitulation calculation carried out on these results was by accumulating the value of the answers on the disagree and strongly disagree criteria to produce the final answer, namely disagree. Then, the accumulated answer values agreed and strongly agreed, resulting in the final answer that was agreed. Finally, a neutral final answer was produced without accumulating the values of the other criterion answers. Based on the results of the recapitulation in the table above, it can be explained as follows: complete with a presentation of the results of observations that have been made in one class, namely class II C Denpasar. Observations were made in this class, since it was the most problematic among other classes in the General Vocabulary course, so the results found in the research could be rich. The observations were made directly through online lectures using the Zoom application, which was conducted three times: the first was carried out on March 3, 2023, at 07.30 p.m., March 31, 2023, at 08.00 p.m., and the last on April 28, 2023, at 07.00 p.m. We made observations three times because the collected data had reached the saturation point.

Of the 12 indicators of students’ difficulties in mastering English vocabulary through online learning, the indicators range, connotation, and idiomaticity were the highest difficulties experienced by students. This can be seen from the percentage results that 66.25% of the students chose to agree, which means agreeing that they had difficulty with that indicator. The remaining 25.00% of students chose neutral, and 8.75% chose disagree. These difficulties included students experiencing problems in acquiring their vocabulary, did not increase the number of vocabularies they had, did not want to explore other vocabulary that had the same meaning, and explored other meanings in one vocabulary.

The second indicator of the difficulty experienced by students was their length and complexity. From the table above, as many as 62.92% of students answered agree, which means they agreed to have difficulties with this indicator; the rest answered neutrally by several 23.75% students, and answered disagree with several 13.33% students. In this case,
the students experienced difficulties in understanding the meaning of the long and complex English vocabulary. Moreover, students also experienced difficulties translating vocabulary into their first language, namely, Indonesian. In addition, students found it difficult to use long and complex English vocabulary to form sentences or paragraphs, even when communicating with others.

The third indicator of difficulty experienced by students was pronunciation: 59.17% of students answered that they had difficulties with English vocabulary pronunciation, 22.08% answered neutral, and 18.75% answered disagree. As for difficulties, among others, the first students had difficulty pronouncing English vocabulary that was just known and just heard. Besides, the existence of sound symbols by the following phonetic transcription symbols such as /θ/, /ʤ/, and /ð/ was still very foreign to be spoken by their tongues which were not their first language, also made the students difficult in pronouncing the vocabulary. The examples of vocabulary containing these symbols are “think” (/θɪŋk/), “judge” (/dʒʌdʒ/), and “that” (/ðæt/). Moreover, students also experienced difficulties in recognizing the pronunciation as well as the meaning of several English vocabularies which have the same pronunciation but have different spellings, or the terms are homophone vocabulary such as the example “buy (/baɪ/) and bye (/bai/)”. From the results generated, the data were verified through observations made directly by the researcher. In this data, students made mistakes in pronouncing the word ‘thing’. The pronunciation should be /θɪŋ/, but the students pronounced /tɪŋ/.

Next, is the fourth indicator of difficulty experienced by students, namely grammar, 57.08% of students admitted that grammar was one of their difficulties in mastering English vocabulary through online learning, which means they answered agree, and the remaining 24.17% of students answered neutral, and 18.75% of students answer disagree. In this section, students had problems with syntactic interference, which when learning the target language was still influenced by their first language’s grammar. Another difficulty was that students were still confused about using English vocabulary correctly according to the applicable grammar rules and tenses used, such as the examples of the words “mean, means, meaning, meaningfully, or meant.” They were confused about when to use those words and how to arrange them with other words in the form of conjunctions such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs.

Another indicator that was difficult for students to experience while mastering vocabulary through online learning was the meaning. From the results of the calculations in the table above, 55.63% of students experienced difficulties with this indicator, which is indicated by answering the questionnaire distributed: only 28.13% of students answered neutral and 18.75% answered disagree. The difficulties were as follows: difficulty in knowing and interpreting the meaning of the newly learned English vocabulary. Students also had difficulties in determining the right vocabulary to use if the vocabulary has synonymous meanings from other vocabulary words, such as the words “since and because.” In addition, students were still confused about interpreting meaning when they found English vocabulary that contained prefixes, suffixes, and affixes. Lastly, students had difficulty in interpreting English vocabulary that has the same spelling and pronunciation, in several different contexts, such as the word “miss” which has different meanings, i.e., “rindu, kehilangan, and nona.” From the results that had been obtained, the data were verified through observations made directly by the researcher. In this data, students seemed confused about using vocabulary according to their true meaning, such as the vocabulary ‘drip, drop, and 'fall. Students thought that none of these vocabularies had specific usage rules when looking at the meanings and conditions they explained.
Regarding the difficulties faced by the students, the findings from their interviews can be expressed in the following ways. First, the students’ difficulty factors in range, connotation, and idiomaticity were not familiar with connotative and idiomatic vocabulary and were rarely used in constructing sentences and communicating every day in English. Discussing these phenomena, the factor students had difficulties with this indicator was their lack of exposure to vocabulary of a connotation and idiomaticity type, which, with this very rapid technological development, actually made it easier for students to find sources and learning materials about this type of vocabulary. In addition, other factors came from the habits of students who lacked practice using this type of vocabulary in everyday communication.

Second, the difficulty factor in length and complexity was that students had difficulty remembering the arrangement of letters when they wanted to spell vocabulary; moreover, they did not fully understand the correct vocabulary articulation, and it was rarely used by students. From these findings, it can be concluded that the factors that caused students to experience difficulties in the length and complexity of vocabulary indicators were the lack of morphological awareness and passively learning English vocabulary.

Third, the difficult factors for students in pronunciation were confusion in determining the correct pronunciation of vocabulary that had the same form as another vocabulary; then, they were not familiar with the sound symbols and articulation of the English vocabulary, as well as the occurrence of fossilization due to the habit of pronouncing vocabulary incorrectly. In this case, the factors that caused students to have difficulty pronouncing vocabulary were their orthographic interference, their lack of exposure to pronouncing vocabulary correctly, and the fossilization of incorrect pronunciations.

Fourth, the students’ difficulty factors in grammar were not mastering tenses well in order to know the changes in the form that occurred in the vocabulary, and also the feeling of lack of confidence in using the vocabulary, for fear of being wrong in the arrangement of applicable grammar. From the findings that had been presented, the factors that caused students to have difficulty with grammar indicators were the lack of training to be able to master tenses in English well and experiencing anxiety about making mistakes in using vocabulary.

Fifth, the difficult factors for students in meaning were mastering the meaning of vocabulary, which was not a priority for students, and differences in meaning in many vocabularies that had the same form. From the explanation of the findings in this study, the factors that caused students’ difficulties in the meaning indicator were the low level of student attention towards a deeper understanding of vocabulary, which also created limitations for students in their knowledge of lexical meaning.

Discussion
Based on the data obtained, the first data result was that the students faced difficulties in range, connotation, and idiomaticity, in line with the previous studies by Surmanov and Azimova (2020) and Thornbury (2002) that beginner students find it simpler to employ a vocabulary that could be used in several general settings than synonyms with a more constrained range. Moreover, it was difficult to determine the exact meaning of one vocabulary depending on the context of the conversation they wanted to display, and idiomatic expressions, such as “make up your mind and a good deal of” will be much more difficult to understand the meaning, rather than vocabulary which had more transparent meanings “decide and many” decide and many’.
These findings had the factors underlain and could solidify with the previous researchers, according to Elgobshawi (2020) EFL students from Saudi Arabia who participated in the study revealed, the findings that the underlying causes of students’ difficulties with range connotation, and idiomaticity were a lack of exposure to idioms both in academic and non-academic contexts, as well as lack of familiarity becomes a barrier factor in learning idiomaticity vocabulary. Moreover, the limited use of English in everyday conversation leaves EFL students with low exposure to intensive and extensive language practices (Somjai & Soontornwipast, 2019).

Next, the students’ difficulties in length and complexity according to what was discovered by Salam and Nurnisa (2021), some students of Pesantren (boarding school) in West Kalimantan said that the length of words and the work needed to master them are balanced, meaning that if a term has a long and difficult spelling, students would have to exert more effort to remember and comprehend it. Moreover, according to Sujadi and Wulandari (2021), long and complex vocabulary makes it more difficult to learn than short vocabulary for third-semester students of food technology majors who incidentally were in elementary levels, such as the words public health center vocabulary, expired date, fermentation, and fish spoilage, making it difficult for students to translate the meaning into their first language.

The explanation provided above for the length and complexity of the student difficulty in the findings was supported by a number of factors that were consistent with earlier research by Quy et al. (2022) that the existence of morphological awareness possessed by students could help them simplify and remember the spelling of long and complex vocabularies. In addition, the role of morphology in language learning helps students pronounce complex words more easily through the application of morphological awareness. In addition, according to Jiang (2020), passively learning English is also a factor because of the infrequent reading and practice of students to use the new vocabulary acquired and learned before.

Then, the students’ difficulties in pronunciation were in accordance with the findings of Thornbury (2002) that students had difficulty pronouncing new vocabulary and had not mastered the correct way of pronouncing it. In addition, according to Komalasari (2022) and Reskiawan et al. (2020), another difficulty was when students found vocabulary that had the same pronunciation but different forms of spelling.

The factors underlying students’ difficulties in pronunciation are in line with the results of several previous studies. First, according to Qodriani (2021), students’ mistakes and problems in pronunciation could be caused by linguistic interference from their first language, and second, orthographic forms in English that are entirely different from students’ first language, namely Indonesian. In addition, it made it difficult for students to adapt to these conditions. In another study, according to Ananda (2023) on second language learners, the fossilization that tended to occur was the fossilization of phonology, morphology, and syntax. Fossilization occurred because of the highly ambiguous rules of first-language Indonesian and the target language English. Therefore, students had difficulty pronouncing and placing morphemes correctly, and had difficulty determining sentence structures correctly.

In addition, the findings of the students’ difficulties in grammar are in line with the study by Septiana (2020) and Thornbury (2002) in the context of translating the first language of Indonesian into the target language of English; syntactic interference is often seen in EFL students. For example, “boy handsome” was grammatically wrong in English, and the correct one was “handsome boy”; this happened because of the influence of the first
language’s grammar. Moreover, Andriani and Sriwahyuningsih (2019) argued that students also experienced difficulties when categorizing vocabulary, such as determining adjective comparative vocabulary by adding the -er ending of the vocabulary spelling.

The students’ difficulties in grammar were underlain by the factors that were in accordance with previous research by Amini et al. (2022) with the low literacy skills students had in English, as well as the minimal vocabulary they had and the grammar they adhered to, which could be a reason students felt anxious in English class. In addition, one of the reasons why most students still experienced difficulties in English grammar was that they had not mastered tenses well, coupled with a large number of tenses, and each tense had different characteristics (Dhona, 2020).

Another indicator of students’ difficulties was meaning; these findings are in accordance with the study by Thornbury (2002), who found that students’ problems were in determining vocabulary that had abundant meanings, and Reskiawan et al. (2020), who found that EFL students had difficulty interpreting language that had synonymous definitions, antonyms, and almost the same form but different meanings.

The factors of the student’s difficulties in indicator meaning were students’ limited comprehension of linguistic meaning and their lack of attention to a higher level of vocabulary were the leading causes of their difficulty with the meaning indicator. In a study by Sari (2019), students who were translators in translating language faced many meaning problems, such as linguistic meaning, grammatical meaning, contextual meaning, textual meaning, and socio-cultural meaning. Lexical meaning was defined by the purpose mentioned in the dictionary. For example, the English word “bad” can mean “buruk, jahat, jekel, busuk, salah, gawat, and susah” in Indonesian.

CONCLUSION
The findings and discussion are presented in the previous chapter of this study. There were five kinds of linguistic difficulties experienced by students, which consist of first difficulties in range, connotation, and idiomaticity, where the challenges experienced by students were having problems in vocabulary acquiring, including understanding the language that had the same spelling form but contained different meaning, recognizing the connotative and denotative meaning, and understanding terminology with idiomatic meaning. Second, due to difficulties in length and complexity, students had trouble understanding the importance of translating long and complex English vocabulary into their first language, and using it to communicate orally and in writing. Third, pronunciation difficulties: Students found it challenging to pronounce new vocabulary and some of the sound symbols in the phonetic transcription symbols; they also recognized and determined the correct pronunciation of homophone vocabulary. Fourth, difficulties with grammar: students had problems with syntactic interference and using language correctly according to the applicable grammar rules and tenses used. Fifth, regarding difficulties in meaning, students experienced difficulties in lexical meaning and morphological derivation in English vocabulary. Apart from these five difficulties, there were four indicators of difficulty that produced different answers from the data collection techniques used, namely spelling, the ability to memorize vocabulary, interest in mastering vocabulary, and the situation and conditions during the learning process.

Based on the results of interviews regarding the factors underlying students’ difficulties in mastering English vocabulary through online learning systems, they were classified into two types of difficulty factors: linguistic and non-linguistic. The linguistic difficulty factors included students’ lack of exposure to vocabulary of a connotation and
idiomaticity type, lack of morphological awareness, students’ orthographic interference, lack of exposure to pronouncing vocabulary correctly, and the limitations of students’ knowledge of lexical meaning. Meanwhile, the non-linguistic difficulty factors include lack of practice in using this type of vocabulary in everyday communication, passively learning English vocabulary, the fossilization of incorrect pronunciations, students’ lack of training to master tenses in English well, experiencing anxiety about making mistakes in using vocabulary, and the low level of student attention toward a deeper understanding of vocabulary.

REFERENCES


