

## **The Factors Affecting Students' Inability in Vocabulary Mastery**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study explores the internal and external factors affecting students' inability to master English vocabulary, focusing on eighth-grade students at SMP Nasrani 5 Medan. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were gathered through questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations involving 12 students. The findings revealed that internal factors such as low motivation, lack of interest, fear of making mistakes, and poor study habits significantly hinder vocabulary retention and usage. Meanwhile, external factors including monotonous teaching methods, limited access to learning resources, and an unsupportive environment further exacerbate the issue. Most students reported a lack of confidence, minimal English exposure outside class, and inadequate parental or institutional support. The study concludes that vocabulary mastery is impeded by a combination of psychological, pedagogical, and environmental factors. It recommends the adoption of interactive teaching strategies, provision of adequate learning resources, and increased involvement from teachers and parents to improve vocabulary acquisition. These findings are expected to contribute to the improvement of English language teaching practices at the junior high school level.

**Keywords:** Vocabulary Mastery; Learning Motivation; Teaching Methods

## INTRODUCTION

Mastering English has become a critical skill in today's globalized world. As a universal language, English is widely used in education, business, technology, and communication. Proficiency in English enables individuals to access global knowledge, compete internationally, and participate in modern academic and professional environments. Among the key components of English language proficiency, vocabulary mastery serves as the foundation for communication and comprehension. Without sufficient vocabulary, students cannot effectively express ideas, understand messages, or engage in language-based tasks (Henderson & Limanta, 2019).

Vocabulary is defined as a collection of words known and used by a person or group in a specific language (Hornby, 2000). It includes productive vocabulary words actively used in writing and speaking and receptive vocabulary words recognized when reading or listening (Sutrisno & Wulandari, 2021). A strong vocabulary base supports the development of the four main language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Moreover, a student's overall academic performance is closely linked to their vocabulary knowledge, making it a priority in English language education (Firdaus & Marlina, 2020).

Despite its importance, many junior high school students still face serious difficulties in mastering English vocabulary. Preliminary observations at SMP Nasrani 5 Medan revealed that 12 out of 25 eighth-grade students (48%) were unable to complete a simple English writing task about "Independence Day." This suggests that nearly half of the students lack the vocabulary competence necessary for basic communication. Their difficulty in expressing ideas and completing assignments highlights a broader issue of low vocabulary acquisition and poor language development, which may impact their academic performance and confidence in learning English (Simanjuntak, 2022).

These challenges reflect a complex interaction of internal and external factors. Internally, students often lack motivation, interest, confidence, and consistent study habits. Externally, they face limitations in teaching methods, access to resources, and support from their environment. Several studies (Putri & Hartono, 2020; Wahyuni & Bakti, 2018) have discussed these factors separately, but few have examined them together in a focused school setting using direct classroom observation and student feedback.

Furthermore, prior research has emphasized the benefits of interactive strategies and gamified learning tools in enhancing vocabulary acquisition

(Anwar & Safitri, 2021; Ramadhani et al., 2023). However, there is still a lack of comprehensive studies that explore both the root causes of students' difficulties and practical classroom-based solutions, particularly in under-resourced or conventional teaching contexts. This research fills that gap by investigating the internal and external factors affecting students' inability to master vocabulary at SMP Nasrani 5 Medan. It combines questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations to provide a detailed understanding of the problem and offer context-based recommendations.

The results of this study are expected to inform teachers, school administrators, and parents about the challenges students face in vocabulary learning and the steps that can be taken to overcome them. By identifying the real barriers and potential supports, this study contributes to improving English language teaching and learning practices, especially for students who are struggling at the junior high school level.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Vocabulary and Its Importance in Language Learning**

Vocabulary is one of the fundamental components in language learning and serves as a foundation for communication in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. A learner's overall language competence is greatly influenced by their vocabulary knowledge. Miralpeix and Muñoz (2018) emphasize that receptive vocabulary, words that are recognized and understood and productive vocabulary words that are actively used are both crucial for successful communication and comprehension. Insufficient vocabulary can hinder students' ability to express ideas, understand texts, and participate in classroom activities effectively.

### **Internal Factors Influencing Vocabulary Mastery**

Several internal factors contribute to students' inability to master vocabulary. One of the most significant is motivation. Psyridou et al. (2018) explain that intrinsic motivation positively influences students' academic achievement, including their ability to acquire new vocabulary. When students lack the motivation to learn, they tend to be passive and unengaged in vocabulary-building activities. In addition, Jannah and Syafryadin (2022) reveal that a lack of interest in English makes students perceive vocabulary learning as boring and irrelevant, leading to poor engagement and retention.

Another internal factor is self-confidence. Students who fear making mistakes often avoid speaking or using new words, limiting opportunities for practice and reinforcement. According to Li (2021), fear of being laughed at or judged negatively by peers significantly reduces students' willingness to speak, which is critical in vocabulary development. Moreover, poor and inconsistent study habits further weaken vocabulary retention. Machfudi and Afidah (2022) found that students who do not routinely review or apply vocabulary are more likely to forget newly learned words, indicating that consistent practice is essential for long-term retention.

### **External Factors Affecting Vocabulary Acquisition**

Apart from internal issues, external factors also play a major role in shaping vocabulary mastery. One such factor is the teaching method employed by teachers. Many English classes still use traditional approaches such as rote memorization and word lists, which do not actively engage students. Karlina and Kusnarti (2024) argue that such methods fail to create meaningful learning experiences, resulting in low retention and motivation. In contrast, more interactive methods, such as games, group work, and digital media, are shown to enhance student involvement and effectiveness in vocabulary learning. Access to learning resources is another critical external factor. Cadime et al. (2018) found that limited access to English books, dictionaries, internet connectivity, and other supporting materials can negatively impact vocabulary growth, especially for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Additionally, the broader learning environment—including home and peer support—affects students' willingness to practice English. Zaitun et al. (2021) note that students who lack encouragement from family or peers tend to avoid using English in real-life contexts, further hindering vocabulary application.

### **The Role of Teachers in Supporting Vocabulary Mastery**

Teachers play a central role in determining the success of vocabulary learning. Their ability to design engaging lessons, provide constructive feedback, and foster a supportive classroom environment directly influences students' vocabulary acquisition. According to Jannah and Syafryadin (2022), students learn better when teachers use creative and interactive techniques such as vocabulary games, multimedia resources, and contextual examples. When instruction is limited to memorization tasks, students are less likely to stay engaged or retain vocabulary meaningfully. Therefore, professional development for teachers is

essential to equip them with innovative and effective instructional strategies that respond to diverse learner needs.

## **METHOD**

### **Design and Sample**

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore and describe the internal and external factors that inhibit vocabulary mastery among second-grade students at SMP Nasrani 5 Medan. This approach was chosen because it provides rich, contextual insights into students' learning experiences and challenges that cannot be captured through quantitative methods (Creswell, 2014). The sample consisted of 12 second-grade students, selected through purposive sampling. This technique was used to ensure that participants represented a group experiencing common difficulties in vocabulary learning and were accessible for in-depth exploration. The study took place at SMP Nasrani 5 Medan, located at Jl. Turi Ujung No.108, Sudirejo I, Kec. Medan Kota, Medan City, North Sumatra. Data collection was conducted over a period of four weeks during the second semester of the 2024/2025 academic year.

### **Instruments and Procedures**

To collect comprehensive and reliable data, the researcher employed three main instruments:

#### **1. Questionnaire**

A structured questionnaire was distributed to all 12 students. It included both closed and open-ended questions designed to elicit information about students' motivation, learning habits, access to resources, and attitudes toward vocabulary learning. The questionnaire served to identify patterns and highlight areas for further exploration in interviews.

#### **2. Interview**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a subgroup of 6 students selected based on their questionnaire responses. The interviews provided a deeper understanding of students' individual experiences, particularly regarding their internal factors (e.g., confidence, interest, consistency) and external influences (e.g., teaching strategies, home environment). Each interview lasted approximately 20–30 minutes and was recorded with the participants' consent. Interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic coding, where emerging themes were grouped into categories to reveal common challenges and perceptions.

### 3. Classroom Observation

The researcher observed four English lessons over the course of the study. The observations focused on how vocabulary was introduced and practiced, the level of student engagement, and the classroom environment, including interactions between teacher and students. Observations were recorded using detailed field notes and later reviewed to identify patterns that supported or contrasted with data from questionnaires and interviews.

#### **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis, consisting of the following stages:

##### 1. Data Reduction

All raw data (questionnaire responses, interview transcripts, and observation notes) were reviewed, and non-relevant information was excluded. The researcher focused only on data that revealed meaningful insights into the factors affecting vocabulary mastery.

##### 2. Data Presentation

The reduced data were organized into descriptive tables and narrative summaries to highlight key patterns. Themes were identified based on repetition, frequency, and relevance across data sources.

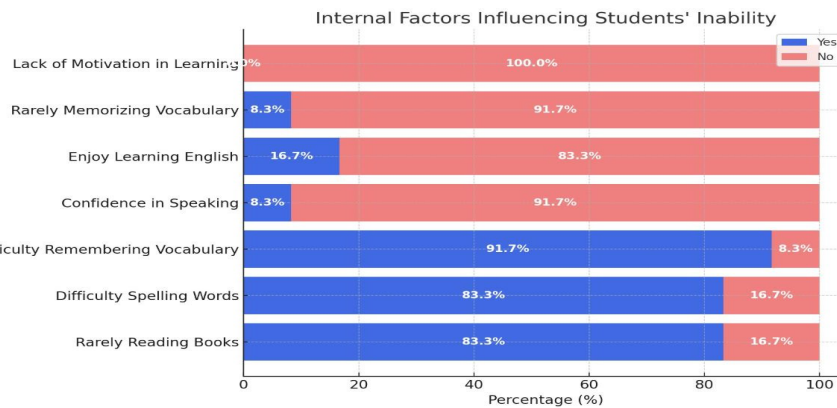
##### 3. Conclusion Drawing and Verification

The final step involved identifying major themes related to students' vocabulary difficulties. To ensure credibility, the findings were triangulated by comparing the results from the three instruments. This cross-checking helped validate the results and enhanced the trustworthiness of the conclusions drawn.

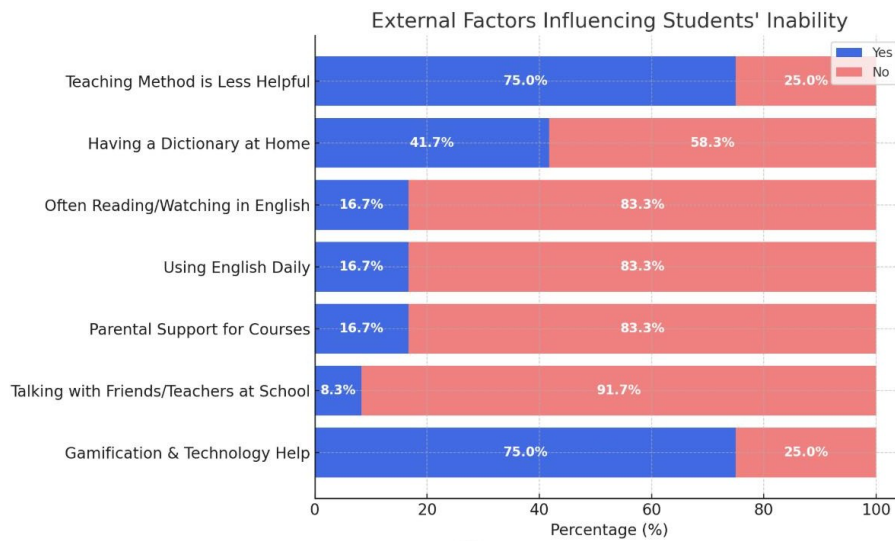
## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Questionnaire Results**

Based on the questionnaire administered to 12 eighth-grade students at SMP Nasrani 5 Medan, two primary categories of factors contributing to low English vocabulary mastery were identified: internal and external factors.



From the internal perspective, all participants (100%) admitted they lacked motivation to learn English vocabulary. This lack of drive led to inconsistent efforts in reviewing or memorizing new words. Only 8.3% of the students claimed to regularly study vocabulary outside school, while the majority (91.67%) said they never engaged in such activities. Moreover, 83.33% reported that they did not enjoy learning English vocabulary, and just 16.67% stated they found the process enjoyable. The students also displayed low self-confidence, with 91.67% feeling uncomfortable using English vocabulary during speaking tasks, and only 8.3% expressing confidence. In terms of memory retention, 91.67% found it hard to remember new vocabulary, and only one student (8.3%) indicated no such difficulty. Additionally, 83.33% faced challenges interpreting English words, struggled with spelling, and acknowledged that they rarely read English texts or books.



From the external perspective, 75% of the students believed that the instructional methods applied in the classroom were not effective in helping them memorize vocabulary. Furthermore, 58.33% reported not having an English dictionary at home. Only a small portion (16.67%) regularly engaged with English through reading books or watching movies, whereas the majority (83.33%) did not participate in such activities at all. English usage in daily life was also very limited; 83.33% stated they never spoke English outside the classroom, and just 16.67% used it occasionally. Parental involvement was low, with only 16.67% of students receiving extra English tutoring or courses funded by their parents. Opportunities for interaction in English with teachers and classmates were scarce, as 91.67% indicated they never used English in school settings. Nevertheless, 75% of the students agreed that learning with the help of technology or games made vocabulary easier to understand.

### Interview Results

The results of in-depth interviews with several students reinforced the data obtained from the questionnaire. Many students acknowledged that they frequently forgot vocabulary because they rarely repeated or applied the words in daily communication. Some expressed confusion due to the similarities in word meanings, and the inconsistency between spelling and pronunciation also made it harder to memorize new terms. Additionally, limited study time at home was a contributing factor, as students often prioritized other activities over vocabulary practice.

Students generally acquired new vocabulary through textbook reading,



translation exercises, consulting online dictionaries, watching subtitled movies, or playing word-based games like Scrabble. In terms of self-confidence, most students admitted they were afraid of mispronouncing words, being mocked, or feeling less capable than their classmates. Only a small number felt confident, usually because they practiced speaking more often in tutoring sessions. Students further shared that interactive tools such as educational games, songs, videos, and digital applications were the most effective in helping them learn vocabulary. They expressed a desire for the school to offer more of these resources and to build an environment that encourages regular use of English.

### **Classroom Observation Findings**

Observations conducted in the classroom revealed that the teacher predominantly relied on lecture-based instruction, translation of texts, and vocabulary memorization tasks. Students were generally passive during lessons, listening without actively participating. When prompted to apply new vocabulary, many students appeared reluctant and nervous, likely due to fear of making errors. English was seldom used throughout the instructional process. Vocabulary mastery was evaluated through written assignments and memorization, with little to no emphasis on communicative application. There was minimal interaction among students or between students and the teacher, suggesting that the classroom setting was not conducive to practical vocabulary usage. Frequently observed challenges included incorrect pronunciation, difficulty recalling recently learned words, and an inability to apply vocabulary in appropriate contexts.

The findings of this study reveal that both internal and external factors significantly contribute to students' challenges in mastering English vocabulary. Internally, the most dominant factor identified was lack of learning motivation, which affected students' habits in memorizing vocabulary, reduced their confidence in using new words, and hindered vocabulary retention. Additionally, students showed limited interest in reading, and many struggled with understanding word meanings and spelling. These findings align with Jannah and Syafryadin (2022), who found that students' boredom and lack of interest directly influenced their reluctance to engage in vocabulary learning activities. Similarly, Machfudi and Afidah (2022) reported that inconsistent study habits led to weak vocabulary recall and lower academic performance.

Externally, several environmental and instructional challenges were identified. The most significant of these was the teacher's role in delivering vocabulary lessons. A majority of students reported that teaching methods

relied heavily on lectures, translations, and vocabulary lists—approaches that offered little engagement or contextual practice. This is consistent with Karlina and Kusnarti (2024), who emphasized that traditional methods fail to support long-term vocabulary mastery. The lack of interactive media, games, and student-centered activities made learning monotonous and contributed to students' disengagement. Classroom observations further confirmed this, showing limited use of communicative practices and minimal student participation. These results support Li (2021), who demonstrated that gamified and interactive vocabulary instruction increased student motivation and vocabulary retention.

This study offers novel insight by combining questionnaire, interview, and classroom observation data to holistically examine both internal and external factors affecting vocabulary learning at a local junior high school SMP Nasrani 5 Medan. While previous studies (e.g., Psyridou et al., 2018; Zaitun et al., 2021) have explored similar issues in broader or different contexts, few have directly integrated observational data from the classroom environment to verify student self-reports. This triangulated approach adds to the depth and credibility of the findings and strengthens the understanding of how multiple variables interact in real learning settings.

The implications of this research are particularly relevant for teachers, school administrators, and education policymakers. First, the study reinforces the need for teacher training and professional development focused on interactive and communicative teaching methods. Teachers should be equipped with strategies that include vocabulary games, role-playing, multimedia tools, and project-based learning to make vocabulary acquisition more engaging and contextual. Second, schools should ensure access to English resources such as reading materials, digital tools, and learning support, especially for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Finally, parental involvement must be strengthened by encouraging at-home English exposure, such as shared reading or English-language media.

However, this study has certain limitations. The sample size was small (12 students) and restricted to one school, which may limit the generalizability of the results. Additionally, because the study focused only on eighth-grade students, the findings may not reflect the vocabulary learning experiences of students at different levels or in different regions. Another limitation lies in the scope of external factors—only classroom-related elements were observed, while peer and community influences were not deeply explored. Future research is recommended to involve larger and

more diverse student samples and to examine longitudinal impacts of specific teaching interventions (e.g., digital storytelling, game-based apps). Including teacher perspectives and parental input could also enrich the analysis of external support systems. Despite its limitations, this study provides a useful foundation for improving vocabulary instruction and underscores the importance of addressing both psychological and pedagogical factors in English language learning.

## CONCLUSION

This study found that the most significant factor hindering eighth-grade students' vocabulary mastery at SMP Nasrani 5 Medan is low learning motivation, which is further reinforced by unengaging teaching methods and limited access to English resources. Internally, students struggle with a lack of interest in English, fear of making mistakes, and inconsistent study habits—all of which reduce their ability to acquire and retain vocabulary. Externally, the use of repetitive, teacher-centered instruction and an unsupportive learning environment limits students' exposure to meaningful English use beyond the classroom.

These internal and external challenges are interrelated and often amplify each other. For example, students with low motivation may not respond well to rigid teaching methods or independently seek vocabulary practice, even when resources are available. As a result, their vocabulary growth remains stagnant, affecting overall language proficiency and classroom participation. To address these issues, teachers are encouraged to adopt more interactive and student-centered vocabulary instruction that includes games, multimedia, and contextual learning activities. Such methods can increase students' engagement, boost their confidence, and provide meaningful opportunities to practice using new words. Therefore, a collaborative effort from teachers, schools, and families is essential to create a more supportive, resource-rich, and engaging learning environment that fosters vocabulary development and enhances students' English language skills.

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