English Vocabulary Mastery In Vocational Higher Education: An Analysis Of Challenges And Feasible Strategies

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Abstract

Vocabulary mastery is one of the important keys that bridge the subject comprehension. Understanding new concepts, ideas, and principles requires knowledge and competence in using words in various settings. The success of English learning in ESP will then contribute to the success of understanding other subjects in the field. Therefore, this research aims to investigate the problems, needs, and feasible strategies in improving vocabulary mastery in vocational higher education settings. The total of 303 freshmen students participated in this study, along with 7 English lecturers who were teaching in their classes. A vocabulary test, open-ended questionnaire, and focus group discussion (FGDs) were used as instruments. The results present the current state of students’ vocabulary level. Moreover, a number of strategies were also recommended by the lecturer in terms of students’ English vocabulary learning and development. Future research directions are also presented.

Keywords: Vocabulary mastery, ESP courses, vocational higher education, feasible strategies

INTRODUCTION

English is a lingua franca; it has been seen as the most studied foreign language especially in the third countries. In Indonesia, English has been taught since elementary level and continues to the higher education level. Specifically, many subject materials and resources are written or published in English in higher education context. Students are certainly required to have adequate English skill to comprehend the subject. Understanding new concepts, ideas, and principles requires knowledge and competence in using words in various settings. In this matter, English vocabulary mastery is one of the important keys that bridge the subject comprehension.

In language learning, vocabulary is a basic unit to comprehend before going to other units or skills. Vocabulary may indeed refer to the collection of words known by an individual. It may also signify the body of specialized terms in a field of study or activity. By this definition, vocabulary is
pertained as the first gate of language learning. When someone wants to produce a language, they must have enough words in their heads. The four language skills can only be learned when someone master the vocabulary. In terms of English learning, vocabulary mastery plays such important role to build language proficiency.

Many scholars had proposed that vocabulary is a core component in language learning. Despite its complexity, vocabulary knowledge is connected to all other language abilities (Milton and Fitzpatrick, 2014). Students may face difficulty in expressing their idea or comprehend the subject if they don’t comprehend the vocabulary. They will find it easier to communicate in foreign languages if they understand the words (Aminatun and Oktaviani, 2019). Students that have a command and a stronger grasp on the use of language benefit immensely in their studies (Behlol, 2010). Moreover, low vocabulary knowledge negatively affects a student's academic performance in a variety of university-level language skills, linguistics, literature, and translation courses (Afzal, 2019). Other studies were also conducted to see the correlation between vocabulary knowledge and students’ academic achievement (Milton and Masrai, 2017; Alsahafi, 2023). The results imply that academic vocabulary knowledge is a significant component that explains an additional variance in learners' academic accomplishment, in addition to IQ and the quantity of one's L1 and L2 vocabulary.

Moreover, scholars had also suggested various strategies in English vocabulary teaching and learning. A study conducted by Sari and Aminatun (2021) concluded that watching English-language movies can benefit students in expanding their vocabulary. This strategy appeals to students because it is engaging. Furthermore, another research suggested that the use of songs to improve students' vocabulary mastery skills can be concluded to have a significant impact (Gushendra, 2017; Sari et.al., 2019; Pardede et.al., 2023). The author believes that using songs can help students improve their vocabulary mastery while also motivating them to learn English.

Another strategy that often used in vocabulary learning is utilizing games. Scholars reported that games could improve vocabulary mastery in the most entertaining ways (Yasmiatun and Sumardiyan, 2022; Laila, 2023; Trihandayani, 2023; Pauliana et al., 2023). This strategy particularly works with young students, such as elementary and junior high school students. Keeping personal vocabulary notes are also reported as one successful strategy in enriching students’ vocabulary (Syifa, 2020).

Based on the literatures above, it can be concluded that English vocabulary mastery is essential in students’ learning and academic achievement. If students have limited English vocabulary, especially with regard to academic subject matter, this will result students’ difficulties in comprehending other subjects that incorporating English materials and resources.

In vocational higher education settings, students mostly required to take English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as mandatory courses. These courses present English in specific topics in students’ major or field. The success of English learning in ESP will then contribute to the success of understanding other subjects in the field. Therefore, it is interesting to analyze and develop a model
of vocabulary teaching and learning effectively, depending on context and subject matters. Thus, this research aims to investigate the problems, needs, and feasible strategies in improving vocabulary mastery in vocational higher education settings. There are two research questions proposed in this study:
1. How is the current situation of students’ English vocabulary learning?
2. What strategies are the lecturers recommended in improving students’ English vocabulary?

This research will hopefully contribute to the more effective English vocabulary teaching and learning activities, which in turn promotes students in comprehending the subjects in their fields.

**METHOD**

*Settings and Participants*

The study investigates current situation of students’ English vocabulary; their problems, needs, and recommended strategy to improve it. The participants of this study consisted of students and English lecturers in Department of Business Management at Politeknik Negeri Batam. The total of 303 freshmen students participated in this study, along with 7 English lecturers who were teaching in their classes. A convenience sample method was used as the sampling strategy. The student’ participants originated from various study programs in the department (see Table 1), and were taking ESP classes in current academic year when this research was conducted. The lecturer’ participants in this study all have a language-background education, in which six of them have master degree in English teaching.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study Program</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Enrolled ESP courses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Managerial Accounting (AM)</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>English Business 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Trade Logistics (LPI)</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>English for Logistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accounting (AK)</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>English for Oral Communication</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students from various study programs who had taken various ESP courses made up the student participants, as Table 1 illustrates. It should be noted that the ESP courses available in each study program may vary due to different graduate competency objectives.

*Data Collection and Analysis*

The data were collected from both students and lecturers. The initial stage of data collection was to determine the learners’ prior vocabulary competence in relation to the non-English subject in their study program. The vocabulary test was administered using online quiz tool, with the total of 50 multiple-choice questions. The result then analyzed descriptively by identifying the score result into three levelling tag; low, moderate, and advance.

Furthermore, an open-ended questionnaire was also given to the lecturer’s participant, with the purpose investigating the current ESP class situation. Lastly, in order to gather more detailed information about vocabulary learning activities and the reflection of strategies used in teaching
English vocabularies, the focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted as research instrument. After the data collection stage was carried out completely, the data were analyzed qualitatively using content analysis and classified according to the following aspects: Current State of Students’ English Vocabulary and Strategies Recommendation.

An online consent form at the outset of the survey ensured that participants' participation was entirely voluntary in accordance with research ethics. Furthermore, the participants’ responses are only used for research purposes, and their personal information remains anonymous.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to look into the issues, needs, and workable solutions for enhancing vocabulary mastery in vocational higher education environments. To answer the research questions, descriptive statistics and content analysis were used and the results are comprised in two sections. The first section presents the results of current condition of students’ English vocabulary, including their level and class condition based on lecturers’ point of view. The second section portrays the opinion of the lecturers of strategies they recommend to be implemented for improving students’ English vocabulary.

Current State of Students’ English Vocabulary

To examine students’ current level of students’ English vocabulary, a set of vocabulary test was administered. The result is shown in the following chart.

![Students' English Vocabulary Level](image)

Picture 1. Students’ English Vocabulary Current Level in Percentage

Picture 1 illustrates the current level of students’ English vocabulary, in which suggests that the majority of students are either in moderate to advance level of vocabulary mastery. More than half of student’s participants (64.68%) are in moderate level in terms of their vocabulary mastery and 14.20% of participants appear to have an advance level of vocabulary mastery. Meanwhile, there are a few numbers of students (21.12%) who are still portrayed as having low level of vocabulary. The result indicates that student participants are generally have a fairly good vocabulary mastery.

However, this result is contradicted by the result of questionnaire administered to lecturer
participants. Most of lecturer believe that their students’ vocabulary level ranges from low to moderate.

“My students have medium to lower level of vocabulary.” (participant 1)

“In general, most students in my class are at the elementary to intermediate level of vocabulary. They understand for vocabularies used in daily speech rather than in specific field.” (participant 2)

“More than three quarters have limited English vocabularies.” (participant 3)

“Mostly they are in elementary level, about 5% is intermediate level and about 2% is advance level.” (participant 4)

“They range from low intermediate to intermediate.” (participant 5)

“The students' vocabulary mastery is mostly beginner A1/A2 and a few of them are intermediate level.” (participant 6)

Moreover, the lecturers also reported that their students have limited vocabulary. This then leads to difficulties on expressing themselves in form of written or oral communication in English.

“Students find the obstacles in expressing their sentence precisely in English, especially for saying the complex text.” (participant 1)

“Some students may feel hesitant or lack confidence when speaking in English. Fear of making mistakes can hinder participation in class discussions or oral presentations.” (participant 3)

Insufficient vocabulary then causes chain effect such as lack of confidence when participating in English learning. In a whole, lecturer participants considered that their students are mostly in low level of vocabulary and only few of them have moderate level of English vocabulary.

The contrasted outcome from students’ vocabulary test and lecturer’s questionnaire could be the consequence of different way of assessment used to portray students’ vocabulary level. During the class, the lecturer revealed that they mostly assess their students’ vocabulary level by observing students’ daily participation such as their language productive skill (speaking and writing). Particularly for speaking practice, students have some difficulties to remember and pronounce the words correctly. In contrast to that, assessing students’ vocabulary level by giving them a set of vocabulary test may result differently as this technique promotes less subjective and more precisely measured result.

Moreover, Behlol (2010) claimed that it is possible to categorize vocabulary into two categories: passive and active. He explained that active vocabularies consist of words that students understand, remember, write with the proper spellings, pronounce correctly, and use effectively in speaking and writing. Passive vocabulary, on the other hand, consists of words that students can recognize and understand when they occur in context but that they cannot produce or use correctly in different contexts. This also may explain the different results in terms of students’ current state of English vocabulary.

**Strategies Recommendation**

Focus group discussion (FGD) was used to collect more specific data regarding the learning
activities and reflection of the strategies implemented in teaching English vocabulary.

The lecturers claimed that they have implemented several ways of helping students to improve their vocabulary. A number of lecturers provided students with glossary or phrases lists that relates to certain topics in the subject matters and vocabulary notes.

“So far, I keep encouraging my students in improving their vocabulary, particularly in business. I also have given them vocabulary related to business correspondence.” (participant 1)

“As far as I am concerned, I do help students to improve their competency in vocabulary by giving them assignment that relates to certain topic in business, also by giving them list of glossary or phrases relates to the subject matter.” (Participant 2)

“I force them to write vocabulary notes - if they didn't not know a word, they must write it in their vocabulary notes.” (participant 4)

“To help the students, I apply several methods in teaching vocabulary such as word family, word class, word-based clues, word web, and word forms. I also often reminding them to have their vocabulary notebook.” (participant 6)

In addition, it was suggested by other lecturers that they encourage students to employ and interact with English as much as possible. This kind of activity may include speaking English-only in class, watch English movie, book club, and so forth.

“I give the students relevant text to read, encourage them to have book club, or let them discuss the literature. This can help them building their vocabulary.” (participant 1)

“I have implemented the strategies since day 1. I combine casual and formal terms in their field. This is because I see students become easily bored with formal terms and more interested in informal vocabularies. Thus, I put the words side by side and explaining when to use which. I believe this method has made them more motivated in seeing English as a form of communication, either casually or formally. I have seen some improvement so far.” (participant 3)

“I think i have helped them to improve their vocabulary a lot. My strategies are to force them to speak English in class (no Bahasa), encourage them to watch English movie or video with English subtitle and encourage them to speak English in daily routine with other people.” (participant 4)

“Students’ vocabulary improved when doing presentation and discussion and it really meets their needs for the course.” (participant 6)

“In teaching the students, I use different approach, not only lecturing them every meeting, sometimes they have to work in groups, pairs, as well as by their own. In general, I let the students clarify their idea toward something whether in speaking, reading or writing.” (participant 7)

Furthermore, utilizing digital tools and resources was also reported as one strategy the lecturers used in improving students’ English vocabulary. Technology plays a significant role in enhancing English vocabulary development by providing interactive, engaging, and context-based learning opportunities. The lecturers disclosed that digital tools and resources play a critical role in assisting their teaching. There are many digital tools and resources can be applied in class activities such as
mobile application, games, sources, quiz and others interactive learning.

“I help my student’s vocabulary improvement by **discussing words** they don’t understand in the class. The discussion is not only about the meaning but also the pronunciation. I also ask them to practice their pronunciation by using **ELSA SPEAK application**” (participant 5)

“I also encourage them to use their devices as a **mobile dictionary.**” (participant 4)

“I always shared **video of essential vocabulary from YouTube** and encourage them to use some **vocabulary apps** on their mobile.” (participant 6)

In general, various strategies were implemented to help students improve their vocabulary during the courses. Lecturers proposed several strategies such as providing glossary related to subject matters, requiring students to have vocabulary notes, exposing students with English as much as possible, and even utilizing digital tools and resources.

On top of that, lecturers eagerly recommended that the particular topic of vocabulary development should be incorporated in each and every ESP courses offered by the department. At this point, there is no specific topic for vocabulary building in ESP syllabuses, as the lecturers were only trying to integrate the vocabulary building activities on the syllabus’ topics. More than half of students is having difficulties in arranging sentence due to lack of vocabularies. They also struggle with paraphrasing due to a lack of vocabulary. They frequently rely on translation software. One of the primary issues is that not every term is used appropriately in every subject, which results in horrifying sentences. Students need guidance to overcome this issue, yet there is not so much room to incorporate vocabularies learning based on the course syllabus. Consequently, the topics of vocabulary development is suggested to be particularly included in all ESP course in Management Business department.

**CONCLUSION**

The present study has found that the majority of students are in the moderate level of vocabulary mastery, based on their vocabulary test. Nevertheless, the lecturers survey conveyed that students’ vocabulary level majorly are on beginner level, and only few of them get moderate level. The different way of assessment used to portray students’ vocabulary level may contribute to this contradictory result. Moreover, lecturer participants suggested several strategies in terms of students’ vocabulary learning dan development. The lecturers suggested a number of strategies, including giving students access to subject-related glossaries, getting them having vocabulary notes, exposing them to English as much as possible, and even making use of digital tools and resources. They as well have done interactive activities such as role-playing; being a buyer and seller by giving some cases, group discussions, and working in project. The lecturers also promoted the reading habits by assigning relevant texts, encouraging book clubs, or discussing literature in class to help students build vocabulary and comprehension skills. Furthermore, lecturers strongly suggested that the specific topics of vocabulary development be included in each and every ESP course that the
Indeed, the current study has thrown up many questions in need of further investigation. There was no scientific measurement used to evaluate the lecturer participants’ strategies, as it could not be claimed as successfully developed students’ vocabulary mastery. Further work needs to be done to evaluate whether the recommended strategies could successfully improve students’ vocabulary mastery. Potential comparisons these strategies could be beneficial to determine which strategies is more suitable in other settings.

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