

Exploring Students' Strategies in Learning English Vocabulary Through Reading Activities at SMPN 4 Koto Baru

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Abstract: Vocabulary mastery is essential for developing English language proficiency because it supports reading comprehension and other language skills. However, junior high school students frequently encounter difficulties in understanding unfamiliar vocabulary during reading activities. This study aimed to explore the vocabulary learning strategies employed by eighth-grade students while reading English texts at SMPN 4 Koto Baru. A descriptive qualitative design was adopted involving eleven eighth-grade students and one English teacher selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Creswell's qualitative data analysis procedures, including data organization, reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing. The trustworthiness of the findings was ensured through source and technique triangulation. The findings revealed three main vocabulary learning strategies: (1) asking teachers and classmates for explanations, (2) guessing word meanings from contextual clues, and (3) using dictionaries to verify unfamiliar vocabulary. Asking teachers and classmates emerged as the dominant strategy because students perceived it as the fastest, easiest, and most reliable way to understand unfamiliar words. These findings indicate that students primarily rely on social interaction while gradually developing independent vocabulary learning through contextual guessing and dictionary use. The study recommends that English teachers foster greater learner autonomy by encouraging contextual inference and effective dictionary use alongside collaborative classroom learning.

Keywords: vocabulary learning strategies, vocabulary, reading activities, qualitative research, junior high school students.

1. Introduction

Vocabulary is one of the most essential components of English language learning because it supports students in understanding and using the language effectively. Without adequate vocabulary mastery, students often experience difficulties in understanding English texts, expressing ideas, and participating in classroom communication. Vocabulary is not only a collection of words but also the foundation that supports the development of the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Therefore, vocabulary mastery has an important role in helping students achieve successful language learning outcomes [2] Likewise, [3] explain that vocabulary is a fundamental element in learning English as a foreign language because students need sufficient vocabulary to understand and communicate ideas effectively.

Students with limited vocabulary generally encounter difficulties when reading English texts because they cannot identify the meanings of unfamiliar words. As a result, they often fail to understand the overall message of a text. [4] state that inadequate vocabulary mastery causes students to lose important information during reading, which eventually affects their language development. Similarly, Susanto emphasizes that vocabulary is the foundation of foreign language learning because all language skills depend on students' vocabulary knowledge. These opinions indicate that vocabulary mastery should become one of the main priorities in English language teaching, especially at the junior high school level.

Among the four language skills, reading is considered one of the most effective ways for students to acquire new vocabulary. Through reading activities, students are exposed to unfamiliar words in meaningful contexts, enabling them to understand vocabulary more naturally. Reading is not merely the process of pronouncing written words but also a cognitive activity that requires readers to construct meaning from a text [5] explains that reading is an activity through which readers understand messages delivered by the writer. Furthermore, [6] argues that developing reading ability contributes significantly to vocabulary growth because students continuously encounter new words while interacting with English texts. Therefore, reading activities provide valuable opportunities for students to expand their vocabulary while improving reading comprehension.

Although reading contributes positively to vocabulary development, many students still experience considerable difficulties in understanding unfamiliar words during reading activities. These difficulties encourage students to apply various vocabulary learning strategies to help them understand the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary. Vocabulary learning strategies refer to the techniques or actions used by learners to discover, understand, remember, and use new vocabulary effectively [7] Appropriate learning strategies enable students to become more active and independent learners because they can manage their own learning process according to their needs.

Several previous studies have investigated vocabulary learning strategies. [8] reported that students commonly use three strategies while learning vocabulary through reading activities: asking teachers or classmates, guessing word meanings from context, and using dictionaries. These strategies help students overcome vocabulary difficulties and improve reading comprehension. In addition, [9] categorized vocabulary learning strategies into cognitive, metacognitive, memory, and activation strategies, explaining that each strategy contributes differently to vocabulary acquisition depending on learners' characteristics and learning situations.

Other related studies also highlight the importance of vocabulary in reading comprehension. [10] found that limited vocabulary mastery significantly influences students' ability to understand English reading texts. Likewise, [11] reported that vocabulary limitations prevent students from identifying main ideas and understanding information presented in English texts. Although these studies provide valuable insights into vocabulary learning, they mainly focus on the relationship between vocabulary mastery and reading comprehension or classify vocabulary learning strategies in general. They do not specifically explore how junior high school students apply vocabulary learning strategies while reading English texts in their everyday classroom learning.

Based on these previous studies, a research gap can be identified. Most earlier research has examined vocabulary mastery, reading comprehension, or vocabulary learning strategies separately. Limited attention has been given to exploring students' actual experiences and strategies when learning English vocabulary through reading activities in Indonesian junior high school classrooms, particularly in public schools. In addition, differences in school environments, learning facilities, teacher support, and students' learning habits may influence the strategies students choose during reading activities. Therefore, further investigation is needed to obtain a deeper understanding of how students learn vocabulary through reading in a specific educational context.

The novelty of this study lies in its focus on exploring students' real vocabulary learning strategies during reading activities at SMPN 4 Koto Baru using classroom observation and semi-structured interviews. Rather than measuring vocabulary achievement, this study describes how students respond when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary, why they choose particular strategies, and how those strategies help them understand English reading texts. By examining students' actual learning experiences, this study is expected to contribute to the

development of more effective vocabulary teaching practices, especially for English teachers at the junior high school level.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the strategies used by eighth-grade students in learning English vocabulary through reading activities at SMPN 4 Koto Baru. The findings are expected to enrich the literature on vocabulary learning strategies and provide practical recommendations for teachers to improve students' vocabulary mastery and reading comprehension through appropriate learning strategies.

2. Research Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the strategies used by eighth-grade students in learning English vocabulary through reading activities. A qualitative approach was chosen because it enables researchers to obtain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, behaviors, and learning strategies in their natural classroom setting. According to [1] qualitative research focuses on exploring and interpreting the meanings individuals or groups assign to social or educational phenomena. Similarly, [12] states that qualitative research is conducted in natural settings to understand phenomena experienced by research participants through descriptive data.

The research was conducted at SMPN 4 Koto Baru, Dharmasraya Regency, West Sumatra. The participants consisted of eleven eighth-grade students from classes VIII A, VIII B, and VIII C, as well as one English teacher. The participants were selected using purposive sampling because they were considered capable of providing rich information related to the objectives of the study. The English teacher recommended students who actively participated in English reading activities and were able to explain the strategies they used when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary. This sampling technique is consistent with [12], who explains that purposive sampling is used to select participants based on specific characteristics relevant to the research objectives.

The data were collected through classroom observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Observation was conducted during English reading activities to identify students' actual strategies when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary. During the observation, students were asked to read an English text about daily activities while the researcher observed how they responded to unfamiliar words. Field notes were used to record students' learning behaviors and interactions throughout the learning process.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted after the observation sessions to obtain more detailed information about the reasons students selected particular vocabulary learning strategies. Eleven students and one English teacher participated in the interviews. The interviews allowed participants to explain their experiences, difficulties, and preferences in learning English vocabulary through reading activities while providing flexibility for the researcher to ask follow-up questions when necessary. Documentation, including observation notes, interview transcripts, photographs, and video recordings, was also collected to support and strengthen the research findings.

The collected data were analyzed using the qualitative data analysis procedures proposed by [1]. The analysis involved organizing the collected data, reading the entire data set, coding important information, categorizing the codes into themes, interpreting the findings, and drawing conclusions based on the identified patterns. These procedures enabled the researcher to identify the dominant vocabulary learning strategies used by students during reading activities.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, this study applied triangulation techniques. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing information obtained from students and the English teacher, while technique triangulation was carried out by comparing data collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. According to [12] triangulation enhances the credibility of qualitative research findings because information obtained from different sources and data collection techniques can be compared to confirm their consistency. Through these procedures, the researcher obtained comprehensive and credible data regarding students' strategies in learning English vocabulary through reading activities at SMPN 4 Koto Baru.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

The purpose of this study was to explore the strategies used by eighth-grade students in learning English vocabulary through reading activities at SMPN 4 Koto Baru. The findings were obtained through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews involving eleven students and one English teacher. Data from both techniques showed consistent findings that students employed three main strategies to overcome difficulties in understanding unfamiliar vocabulary during reading activities. These strategies included asking teachers and classmates, guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words from context, and using dictionaries. Among these strategies, asking teachers and classmates emerged as the most frequently used strategy.

3.1.1 Asking Teachers and Classmates

The observation results indicated that all eleven students (100%) asked the teacher when they encountered unfamiliar vocabulary during reading activities. In addition, nine students (approximately 80%) also discussed unfamiliar words with their classmates before or after asking the teacher. These findings indicate that social interaction plays an important role in helping students understand unfamiliar vocabulary. During the observation, students generally stopped reading when they found difficult words and immediately sought explanations from the teacher or nearby classmates before continuing to read.

The interview findings strengthened the observation results. Most students explained that asking the teacher was the easiest and fastest way to understand unfamiliar vocabulary because the teacher could provide direct explanations and examples related to the reading text. Several students also stated that they first asked their classmates because they were sitting nearby. However, if their classmates could not explain the meaning correctly, they still preferred to ask the teacher. These responses demonstrate that although classmates provide initial assistance, students place greater trust in the teacher's explanations.

These findings indicate that students tend to rely on social strategies when learning English vocabulary. According to [2] social strategies enable learners to acquire vocabulary through interaction with other people, particularly teachers and peers, who provide explanations, feedback, and opportunities for discussion. Similarly, [8] reported that asking teachers and classmates is one of the most frequently used vocabulary learning strategies because it helps students obtain immediate clarification when they encounter unfamiliar vocabulary. The findings of the present study are consistent with these previous studies, as students at SMPN 4 Koto Baru considered teachers and classmates to be their primary learning resources during reading activities.

Furthermore, these findings support the view that teacher guidance remains highly influential in English language learning at the junior high school level. Students preferred to receive explanations directly from their teacher because they believed the explanations were more accurate and easier to understand than interpreting unfamiliar vocabulary independently. This condition suggests that teacher-centered assistance still plays a significant role in vocabulary learning, particularly for students with limited vocabulary knowledge.

However, the findings differ from those reported by Alifah (2025), who found that metacognitive strategies were more dominant than social strategies among secondary school students. In the present study, students demonstrated greater dependence on teachers than on independent learning strategies. This difference may be influenced by the learning context, students' vocabulary proficiency, and classroom practices. Since the participants in this study were junior high school students with relatively limited English vocabulary, they naturally preferred strategies that provided immediate and reliable assistance.

Overall, the findings suggest that asking teachers and classmates is the dominant strategy used by students in learning English vocabulary through reading activities. This strategy enables students to solve vocabulary problems quickly, maintain their reading comprehension, and continue reading without prolonged interruption. Nevertheless, teachers should gradually encourage students to develop more independent vocabulary learning strategies so that they become less dependent on external assistance and more confident in understanding unfamiliar vocabulary independently.

3.1.2 Guessing the Meaning of Words Based on Context

The second strategy identified in this study was guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words based on the context of sentences or paragraphs. The observation results showed that eight out of eleven students (approximately 70%) attempted to infer the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary by rereading the surrounding sentences before asking for assistance. During the reading activities, these students carefully examined the context, connected unfamiliar words with vocabulary they already knew, and tried to predict the meaning based on the overall message of the text.

The interview findings confirmed these observations. Several students explained that they preferred to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words before asking the teacher because they wanted to understand the text independently. Some students stated that they reread the sentence several times and related unfamiliar words to other words they had already learned. Others mentioned that guessing vocabulary made reading activities more interesting because they could test their own understanding before receiving confirmation from the teacher. Nevertheless, almost all students admitted that they still asked the teacher whenever they were uncertain about the meaning they had guessed.

These findings indicate that students have begun to apply cognitive vocabulary learning strategies, although these strategies have not yet become their primary choice. [2] explains that cognitive strategies involve learners actively processing information through reasoning, analyzing language patterns, and connecting new vocabulary with prior knowledge. Guessing meaning from context reflects this process because students attempt to construct meaning independently by using contextual clues instead of relying immediately on external assistance.

The findings are also consistent with [5] who argues that reading comprehension is achieved not only by translating individual words but also by understanding the relationship between words, sentences, and the overall meaning of a text. Similarly, [13] emphasizes that contextual understanding helps learners develop vocabulary knowledge more effectively because unfamiliar words are interpreted within meaningful language use rather than through isolated memorization. Therefore, guessing meaning from context allows students to continue reading while simultaneously strengthening their vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension.

In addition, the present findings support the study conducted by [11] which reported that successful readers often utilize contextual clues before consulting external resources. Students who are able to infer meaning from surrounding sentences generally become more active readers because they engage in critical thinking throughout the reading process. However, the present study also revealed that students' confidence in using contextual guessing remained relatively limited. Most participants still sought confirmation from their teacher after making a prediction to ensure that their interpretation was accurate.

This finding suggests that contextual guessing functions primarily as an initial strategy rather than a final solution for understanding unfamiliar vocabulary. The tendency to confirm guessed meanings with the teacher demonstrates that students still depend on teacher guidance despite showing early signs of independent learning. Such dependence may be influenced by their limited vocabulary knowledge and concern about misunderstanding the reading text.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words from context is an important strategy that encourages students to become more independent readers. Although it was not used as frequently as asking teachers and classmates, this strategy helped students develop analytical thinking, maintain reading fluency, and improve their ability to construct meaning from English texts. Consequently, English teachers should provide more opportunities for students to practice contextual guessing through varied reading activities so that they gradually become more confident and independent in learning vocabulary.

3.1.3 Using a Dictionary

The third strategy identified was using a dictionary to determine the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary. Observation results indicated that seven of the eleven students (approximately 65%) consulted dictionaries during reading activities. However, this strategy was less frequently used than asking teachers or classmates and guessing meaning from context. Most students used dictionaries only after other strategies had failed to provide satisfactory explanations.

Interview findings further revealed that students considered dictionaries to provide accurate word meanings but also regarded them as less practical because searching for

unfamiliar vocabulary required more time. Several students admitted that they did not always bring dictionaries to school, while others preferred asking the teacher because immediate explanations allowed them to continue reading without interruption. Consequently, dictionaries were generally used as a final alternative after other strategies had been attempted.

3.2 Discussion

The findings demonstrate that eighth-grade students at SMPN 4 Koto Baru did not rely on a single vocabulary learning strategy. Instead, they tended to combine several strategies according to the level of difficulty of unfamiliar vocabulary encountered during reading activities. Although students employed asking teachers and classmates, contextual guessing, and dictionary use, the teacher remained the primary source of support whenever students experienced uncertainty. This finding suggests that vocabulary learning among junior high school students is characterized by flexible strategy use while still reflecting considerable dependence on teacher guidance.

The dominance of asking teachers and classmates indicates that social interaction remains an essential component of vocabulary learning. Direct interaction enabled students to obtain immediate explanations, clarify misunderstandings, and continue reading activities without prolonged interruption. These findings are consistent with Lestari et al. (2024), who reported that asking teachers and classmates is one of the most frequently employed vocabulary learning strategies among Indonesian EFL learners because it provides immediate clarification and facilitates reading comprehension. Likewise, Manurung and Tridinanti (2024) argued that interaction with teachers and peers positively contributes to vocabulary acquisition by allowing learners to discuss unfamiliar words and receive direct feedback. The present findings therefore reinforce the important role of collaborative classroom interaction in supporting vocabulary learning among junior high school students.

Although social strategies were dominant, the findings also reveal that students had begun to develop more independent vocabulary learning strategies through contextual guessing. Students attempted to infer the meanings of unfamiliar words by rereading sentences, identifying contextual clues, and connecting unfamiliar vocabulary with their prior knowledge before requesting confirmation from the teacher. This finding is consistent with Alifah (2025), who explained that contextual guessing encourages learners to become more active readers by analysing relationships between words and the overall meaning of a text. Similarly, previous studies have suggested that contextual inference supports both vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension because learners construct meaning from authentic language use rather than translating isolated words. Nevertheless, the present study found that most students still required teacher confirmation after making contextual inferences, indicating that teacher guidance remains important while students gradually develop greater confidence in applying independent vocabulary learning strategies.

The findings further indicate that dictionary use functioned as a complementary rather than primary vocabulary learning strategy. Although students acknowledged that dictionaries provided accurate word meanings, they perceived dictionary consultation as less practical during classroom reading activities because it required additional time and dictionaries were not always available. These findings support those of Lestari et al. (2024), who suggested that dictionary use is commonly employed after learners have attempted social and contextual strategies. Likewise, Manurung and Tridinanti (2024) found that students often prefer teacher explanations because they are faster and allow reading activities to continue without interruption. Therefore, the limited use of dictionaries in the present study reflects classroom learning conditions rather than students' negative perceptions of dictionaries themselves.

Another important finding is that students selected vocabulary learning strategies according to the learning situation rather than consistently applying one particular approach. Some students initially attempted to understand unfamiliar vocabulary through contextual guessing, others sought assistance from classmates, and most eventually consulted the teacher whenever uncertainty remained. This pattern suggests that students adjusted their learning approaches based on the difficulty of unfamiliar vocabulary and the availability of learning resources. Such flexibility is consistent with previous studies indicating that successful vocabulary learning involves the appropriate combination of social and cognitive strategies according to learners' needs and classroom contexts.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings imply that English teachers should continue providing direct guidance while simultaneously encouraging students to become more independent vocabulary learners. Classroom activities should gradually provide greater opportunities for students to infer meanings from contextual clues, discuss unfamiliar vocabulary collaboratively, and use dictionaries effectively before seeking direct teacher explanations. Such instructional practices may strengthen students' vocabulary mastery, improve reading comprehension, and gradually develop learner autonomy without eliminating the valuable role of teacher support.

Finally, the consistency of findings obtained from classroom observations and semi-structured interviews strengthens the credibility of this study. Both data sources consistently demonstrated that asking teachers and classmates was the dominant vocabulary learning strategy, followed by contextual guessing and dictionary use. The convergence of evidence across different sources provides greater confidence that these findings accurately represent students' vocabulary learning experiences during reading activities at SMPN 4 Koto Baru and offers a reliable basis for improving English vocabulary instruction in similar educational contexts.

4. Conclusion

This study explored the strategies used by eighth-grade students in learning English vocabulary through reading activities at SMPN 4 Koto Baru. The findings revealed that students employed three main vocabulary learning strategies: asking teachers and classmates, guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words based on context, and using dictionaries. Among these strategies, asking teachers and classmates emerged as the most dominant strategy because students considered it the fastest, easiest, and most reliable way to understand unfamiliar vocabulary encountered during reading activities.

The study also found that students tended to combine different strategies depending on the level of difficulty of the vocabulary they encountered. Although some students attempted to guess the meaning of unfamiliar words independently by using contextual clues, they generally sought confirmation from their teacher to ensure the accuracy of their understanding. Meanwhile, dictionaries were used less frequently because students perceived them as less practical and they were not always available during classroom learning.

These findings indicate that students' vocabulary learning strategies are strongly influenced by teacher support, classroom interaction, vocabulary mastery, and the learning environment. Therefore, English teachers are encouraged not only to provide direct assistance but also to promote students' independent vocabulary learning by encouraging the use of contextual guessing, effective dictionary skills, and other learner-centered strategies during reading activities. It is expected that these practices will improve students' vocabulary mastery, reading comprehension, and learning autonomy.

Future researchers are recommended to investigate vocabulary learning strategies involving a larger number of participants, different educational levels, or different learning contexts. Further studies may also examine the effectiveness of specific vocabulary learning strategies in improving students' vocabulary mastery and reading comprehension through qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method research designs.

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