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Students' Difficulties in Vocabulary Learning in the Eleventh Grade of SMAN 1 Kediri: A Mixed-Methods Case Study, Academic Year 2025/2026

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the difficulties that eleventh-grade students face in learning English vocabulary, to examine how these difficulties affect their English learning, and to identify which difficulty is the most dominant. A mixed-methods case study was conducted at SMAN 1 Kediri, West Lombok, in the 2025/2026 academic year. Quantitative data were collected through an 18-item, five-point Likert questionnaire based on Thornbury's (2004) framework and administered to 70 students; all items were valid (r = .400–.627), and the instrument was reliable (Cronbach's α = .848). Qualitative data were obtained from semi-structured interviews with six students and analyzed thematically. All five aspects of vocabulary learning were rated as high-level difficulties (means 3.46–3.62). Meaning ranked first (M = 3.62), followed by appropriate use (3.60), pronunciation and spelling (3.58), length, complexity and grammar (3.58), and connotation (3.46). The interviews showed that students struggled with words with multiple meanings, words that look alike, and retaining learned meanings. Students also reported that these difficulties reduced their confidence and participation and affected their reading, speaking, writing, and perceived learning progress. The findings are context-bound and point to the need for context-rich, meaning-focused vocabulary instruction.

Keywords: Vocabulary Learning Difficulties, EFL, Senior High School, XI, Mixed-Methods, Case Study.

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INTRODUCTION

English is one of the most widely used languages, serving as a medium of communication in education, technology, science, and diplomacy, as well as a gateway to information in an increasingly interconnected world (Alqahtani, 2015). In Indonesia, English is a compulsory subject at the senior high school level, designed to help students develop the language skills necessary for information and communication competence (Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, 2022). Vocabulary is a fundamental component of English language learning, as it underpins the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing; it enables learners to comprehend oral and written messages, convey ideas, and participate in communication (Nation, 2001; Richards & Renandya, 2002). Without an adequate vocabulary, learners cannot comprehend texts, construct sentences, express ideas, or engage in meaningful communication (Schmitt, 2000; Hatch & Brown, 1995).

Therefore, vocabulary mastery entails more than just memorizing meanings; it encompasses knowledge of a word's form, pronunciation, spelling, meaning, and its appropriate usage within a specific context (Nation, 2001; Thornbury, 2004; Yuliana et al., 2024).

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL)—such as in Indonesia—vocabulary learning becomes particularly critical, as learners have limited exposure to the language and few opportunities to encounter or use vocabulary outside the classroom (Schmitt, 2000). Successful vocabulary acquisition relies on repeated exposure to words across varied contexts (Nation, 2001; Webb & Nation, 2017); however, access to language input and opportunities for language use remain significant challenges for EFL learners (Siyanova-Chanturia & Webb, 2016). Limited vocabulary hinders learners' ability to comprehend texts and express ideas (Melani et al., 2015; Melani et al., 2021; Wibisana et al., 2025; Yuliana et al., 2024). Operationally, vocabulary learning difficulties in this study are defined as the challenges reported and experienced by students in knowing and using words across five aspects: pronunciation and spelling, meaning, length/complexity/grammar, connotation, and appropriate usage (Thornbury, 2004). These five aspects indicate that vocabulary difficulties are not monolithic; rather, they encompass various dimensions of word knowledge that may differ across educational contexts (Thornbury, 2004; Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2000).

Based on observations made during the School Field Experience Program (PLP) at SMAN 1 Kediri, many eleventh-grade students struggle with remembering new vocabulary, misinterpreting the meanings of words and reading passages, constructing sentences using new vocabulary, and participating in vocabulary-related activities. These difficulties manifest in various ways, including mispronunciation (e.g., pronouncing "vegetable" exactly as it is spelled), the repetitive use of the same words in writing, the misinterpretation of definitions, and literal translations—such as translating "I take a bath" as "Aku ambil mandi" (literally "I take/grab a bath"). These observations indicate that the students' challenges extend beyond mere memorization to deeper aspects of language use, which serves as the initial rationale for investigating the difficulties eleventh-grade students at this school face in learning vocabulary.

To address these issues, the proposed solution involves vocabulary instruction that is rich in context and focused on meaning, incorporating repeated exposure and retrieval practice. This approach ensures that students not only recognize the meanings of words but are also able to retain and use them accurately (Nation, 2001; Webb & Nation, 2017; Schmitt, 2000). Teachers should provide contextual vocabulary activities, exercises in pronunciation and spelling, guidance on handling polysemous words (words with multiple meanings) and words with similar forms, and opportunities to apply new vocabulary in speaking and writing (Thornbury, 2004; Nation, 2001; Renandya, 2018). Instruction should also emphasize the appropriate use of words across various contexts—moving beyond simple rote memorization of definitions—so that students can distinguish between different meanings, connotations, and the contextual suitability of word usage (Thornbury, 2004; Cahyono & Widiati, 2008). Furthermore, the classroom environment should be supportive, encouraging students to take risks, make mistakes, and practice using vocabulary with confidence (Renandya, 2018; Nation, 2001). Previous research has examined various difficulties in learning English vocabulary across different contexts; however,

this study differs from those works. Mailasari (2018) identified challenges related to recalling and retaining vocabulary among elementary school students; Crismeilani et al. (2025) observed difficulties in memorizing words among junior high school EFL learners; Herselina et al. (2024) reported issues with prepositions, verbs, and pronouns among university students; Hasan (2024) highlighted problems concerning meaning, pronunciation, retention, and grammar among university learners in Saudi Arabia; Salam and Nurnisa (2021) found difficulties in pronunciation, spelling, and meaning among students in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*); and Isnaini et al. (2025) focused on the use of ChatGPT as a tool for vocabulary learning in higher education. In contrast, this study is situated within the context of an Indonesian senior high school—specifically, the eleventh-grade class at SMAN 1 Kediri—and employs a combination of questionnaire and interview data. It examines five aspects of vocabulary difficulty based on Thornbury's (2004) framework, with a particular focus on the aspect of "appropriate use," which has rarely been explored.

The novelty of this study lies in its integration of evidence from both questionnaires and interviews within an Indonesian senior high school setting—specifically among eleventh-grade students—to provide a more comprehensive account of vocabulary learning difficulties (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2018). This research not only identifies the level of difficulty across five vocabulary aspects but also compares these aspects to determine which presents the greatest challenge, while simultaneously explaining their impact on students' English language learning based on their personal experiences. Furthermore, this study places explicit emphasis on the aspect of "appropriate use"—a dimension that, according to a review of existing literature, has received limited attention within the context of Indonesian senior high schools (Salam & Nurnisa, 2021; Hasan, 2024). Thus, this study offers contextual evidence that can enrich the understanding of vocabulary-related difficulties and serve as a foundation for vocabulary instruction that focuses more on meaning and usage. This research aims to examine the challenges faced by eleventh-grade students in learning English vocabulary, to understand how these difficulties affect their English language learning, and to identify the most dominant challenges. More specifically, this study aims to (1) describe the vocabulary learning difficulties encountered by eleventh-grade students at SMAN 1 Kediri; (2) explain the impact of these difficulties on the students' English language learning; and (3) determine the most dominant aspect of vocabulary learning difficulty within this context. These three objectives are addressed through a case study design employing a mixed-methods approach, which combines questionnaires and interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2018).

METHOD

This study employed a mixed-methods case study design. Mixed-methods research integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches to obtain a richer understanding of an issue through triangulation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The two data types were used complementarily: the questionnaire identified which difficulties students faced and how strongly they were reported. At the same time, semi-structured interviews explained and elaborated these difficulties through students' experiences. A case study is appropriate for investigating a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context (Yin, 2018). Because the case was limited to

eleventh-grade students at one school, the results are context-bound and not intended for broad generalization.

Research Setting and Participants

The study was conducted at SMAN 1 Kediri, a public senior high school in West Lombok, during the 2025/2026 academic year. The school represents a common EFL context in which students have limited exposure to English outside the classroom, and preliminary PLP observations showed that many students had vocabulary difficulties. This study population consisted of eleventh-grade students at SMAN 1 Kediri from the Science (IPA), Social Sciences (IPS), and Language (Bahasa) streams. Eleventh grade was chosen because these students had passed the senior high school adjustment period and had enough experience with English instruction to describe their vocabulary learning. Grade X was excluded because the students were still adjusting to the school, and Grade XII because they were preparing for final examinations.

From this population, 70 students from five classes were included as questionnaire respondents. Six of them were then selected as interview participants (P1 to P6) using purposive sampling (Etikan et al., 2016). They were selected based on their questionnaire responses, which showed high, moderate, and low levels of difficulty, and on their willingness, availability, and ability to express their experiences clearly.

Research Instruments

The closed-ended questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data on students' vocabulary learning difficulties and the most dominant difficulty. The questionnaire was developed from Thornbury's (2004) framework and contained 18 items representing five aspects (Table 1). Items used a five-point Likert scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5), which is effective for collecting structured and comparable data on learners' perceptions (Dörnyei, 2007). It was distributed through Google Forms outside school hours with permission from the school, English teachers, and class leaders.

Table 1. Blueprint of the Vocabulary Learning Difficulties Questionnaire

Aspect	Items	No. of items	Example indicator
Pronunciation and spelling	Q1–Q5	5	Difficulty pronouncing English words correctly
Meaning	Q6–Q9	4	Difficulty remembering previously learned word meanings
Length, complexity, and grammar	Q10–Q13	4	Difficulty learning long or complex English words
Connotation	Q14–Q15	2	Difficulty understanding implied meanings in different contexts
Appropriate use	Q16–Q18	3	Difficulty using vocabulary appropriately in different contexts
Total		**18**	

Semi-structured interviews were used to explore students' experiences in more depth and to explain the difficulties identified in the questionnaire and their effects on students' English learning. Each interview lasted about 15 to 30 minutes, was conducted in Indonesian to ensure clarity, was audio-recorded with consent, and was transcribed verbatim. Interviews continued until no new significant information

emerged from the six participants, indicating data saturation. The researcher translated interview excerpts presented in this article into English.

Data Analysis

Item validity was tested using Pearson Product-Moment Correlation in SPSS (Sugiyono, 2023). With N = 70 (df = 68), the r-table value at the 5% level was 0.235; an item was valid when its corrected item-total correlation exceeded 0.235, and its significance value was below 0.05. Internal consistency was tested with Cronbach's alpha, with values above 0.70 regarded as reliable.

The quantitative data (Questionnaire) were analyzed with descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation) in SPSS version 25. Mean scores were interpreted using the criteria in Table 2. The aspect with the highest mean score was identified as the most dominant difficulty. The qualitative (Interview) data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis: familiarising with the data, initial coding guided deductively by Thornbury's (2004) framework while remaining open to new insights, grouping codes into themes, and interpreting the themes with supporting excerpts. Finally, both data sets were integrated to compare and confirm the findings.

Table 2. Interpretation of Mean Scores

Scale	Agreement	Mean score range	Level of difficulty
1	Strongly disagree	1.00–1.80	Very low
2	Disagree	1.81–2.60	Low
3	Uncertain	2.61–3.40	Moderate
4	Agree	3.41–4.20	High
5	Strongly agree	4.21–5.00	Very high

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Instrument Quality

As Table 3 shows, all 18 questionnaire items were valid and retained. Corrected item-total correlations ranged from .400 (Q18) to .627 (Q2), all above the r-table value of .235, with significance values below 0.05.

Table 3. Validity test results of the questionnaire (N = 70, r-table = .235, sig. < ,05)

Item	r	Sig.	Decision	Item	r	Sig.	Decision
Q1	.516	.000	Valid	Q10	.585	.000	Valid
Q2	.627	.000	Valid	Q11	.534	.000	Valid
Q3	.594	.000	Valid	Q12	.444	.000	Valid
Q4	.529	.000	Valid	Q13	.429	.000	Valid
Q5	.617	.000	Valid	Q14	.516	.000	Valid
Q6	.452	.000	Valid	Q15	.592	.000	Valid
Q7	.505	.000	Valid	Q16	.542	.000	Valid
Q8	.613	.000	Valid	Q17	.501	.000	Valid
Q9	.563	.000	Valid	Q18	.400	.000	Valid

Table 4 shows that Cronbach's alpha was .848 (.850 for standardised items), indicating good reliability (internal consistency). The alpha values if an item was deleted (.835–.846) were all lower than the overall coefficient, so no item was removed.

Table 4. Reliability test results

Cronbach's Alpha	Standardized items	Number of Items	Number of Respondents	Interpretation
0.848	0.850	18	70	Good Reliability

Students' Difficulties in Learning English Vocabulary

Table 5 shows that students reported difficulties in all five aspects. Fifteen of the 18 items fell in the high category, and three (Q12, Q13, and Q14) in the moderate category, with item means from 3.30 to 3.94. These results indicate that students' difficulties involved several dimensions of word knowledge rather than a single problem, which supports Thornbury's (2004) view that vocabulary learning is challenging in terms of pronunciation, spelling, complexity, grammar, meaning, connotation, and use.

Table 5. Mean Scores and Standard Deviations of Questionnaire Items

Item	Indicator	Mean	SD	Level
Pronunciation and spelling (overall mean = 3.58, High)				
Q1	Difficulty pronouncing English words correctly	3.61	1.026	High
Q2	Lack of confidence when pronouncing new vocabulary	3.49	0.974	High
Q3	Difficulty caused by differences between spelling and pronunciation	3.64	0.948	High
Q4	Difficulty caused by differences between Indonesian and English spelling systems	3.61	0.967	High
Q5	Difficulty learning words with silent letters	3.54	0.862	High
Meaning (overall mean = 3.62, High)				
Q6	Difficulty understanding English word meanings correctly	3.44	0.972	High
Q7	Difficulty distinguishing synonyms and antonyms	3.41	0.955	High
Q8	Difficulty remembering previously learned word meanings	3.70	0.804	High
Q9	Difficulty understanding words with similar forms but different meanings	3.94	0.778	High
Length, complexity, and grammar (overall mean = 3.58, High)				
Q10	Difficulty learning long or complex English words	3.81	0.822	High
Q11	Difficulty understanding rarely used or unfamiliar words	3.87	0.741	High
Q12	Difficulty using vocabulary in correct grammatical forms	3.33	0.829	Moderate
Q13	Confusion in determining word forms in sentences	3.30	0.953	Moderate
Connotation (overall mean = 3.46, High)				
Q14	Difficulty identifying positive or negative connotations	3.37	0.966	Moderate
Q15	Difficulty understanding implied meanings in different contexts	3.54	0.896	High
Appropriate use (overall mean = 3.60, High)				
Q16	Difficulty using vocabulary appropriately in different contexts	3.73	0.721	High
Q17	Difficulty choosing the correct word to express ideas	3.51	0.864	High
Q18	Tendency to translate sentences directly from Indonesian into English	3.56	0.810	High

Pronunciation and spelling.

All five items related to pronunciation and spelling showed great difficulty, with item means ranging from 3.49 to 3.64 and an overall mean of 3.58. The highest item was Q3 (M = 3.64), the difference between spelling and pronunciation. Interview data explained this result. Several participants gave the example of *Wednesday*, and P5 referred to *honesty*:

> **P1:** *"In English, what is written on paper or in a book is very different from how it is pronounced. For example, the word 'Wednesday' has a 'd' and an 'e' in the middle, but it is read 'Wenz-day'."*
> **P2:** *"I sometimes have difficulty pronouncing, spelling, and writing English words because some words differ between how they are written and how they are pronounced. For example, I often mispronounce the word 'beautiful'. "*
> **P3:** *"The difficulty I experience is spelling English words that are read differently from how they are written. For example, 'Wednesday', I often read it as 'wensday'"*
> **P5:** *"I often mispronounce words because I follow their spelling. For example, the word 'honest'. I used to pronounce the letter H, but it turned out the H is not pronounced." "Things like that make me less confident when speaking English in front of the class."*

In each case, the problem was a letter that is written but not sounded, so silent letters (Q5) are one concrete form of the gap between spelling and pronunciation (Q3). P5 also said that such experiences reduced confidence when speaking in front of the class. This finding is consistent with Thornbury's (2004) explanation that irregular spelling and pronunciation can make vocabulary difficult to learn. English words do not always follow predictable spelling-to-sound patterns, which may lead students to pronounce words based on their written forms, as Salam and Nurnisa (2021) identified pronunciation and spelling as vocabulary difficulties experienced by students in an Indonesian educational context.

Meaning.

Meaning had the highest overall mean (3.62). All questionnaire items related to meaning difficulties were categorized as high, with mean scores ranging from 3.41 to 3.94. Q9 (words with similar forms but different meanings) had the highest item mean in the whole questionnaire (M = 3.94), followed by Q8, forgetting learned meanings (M = 3.70). Interviews revealed two sources of confusion. First, one word can carry several meanings, so a meaning learned at school fails when the context changes. Second, different words are too close in form or meaning to be told apart:

> **P3:** *"English word meanings are hard to remember and confusing because one word can have many meanings depending on the context. For example, 'bank' can mean a bank where money is kept or the edge of a river."*
> **P6:** *"There are many words that have almost the same form but different meanings. For example, 'accept' and 'except'. I often have to reread so that I do not misunderstand."*
> **P4:** *"At that time I understood its meaning, but when I came across it again a few weeks later, I had already forgotten it."*
> **P5**: *"Sometimes I also forget the meaning of a word because I never use it again after learning it."*

P4 and P5 linked forgetting to the absence of repeated use after learning. These findings show that vocabulary knowledge involves more than memorizing a single definition. Students also need to recognise differences between similar words and interpret meanings in context. Nation (2001) emphasizes that vocabulary knowledge includes form, meaning, and use, while Schmitt (2000) highlights the importance of storing and retrieving word knowledge. This aligns with Hasan (2024) and Salam and Nurnisa (2021), who also reported difficulties understanding word meanings. The

students' difficulty remembering meanings after several weeks also indicates that understanding a word during a lesson does not necessarily guarantee long-term retention.

Length, complexity, and grammar.

Unfamiliar and complex words were the main problem in this aspect (Q11, M = 3.87; Q10, M = 3.81), whereas grammatical forms (Q12, M = 3.33) and word forms in sentences (Q13, M = 3.30) were only moderate. Students described feeling overwhelmed, confused, or afraid when meeting long and unfamiliar words, and P5 explained:

> **P1:** "*My first reaction was shock and feeling overwhelmed, I felt my English was not good enough. In my opinion it is difficult because those words are rarely spoken.*"
> **P2:** "*I feel confused and slightly struggle when I find English words that are long, unfamiliar, or complicated.*"
> **P3:** "*I feel confused and a little afraid when I find long and unfamiliar words. For example, 'Responsibility'*"
> **P5:** "*It feels difficult and I have to open the dictionary and go back and forth looking for the word. Sometimes a single word can make me lose focus while reading.*"

P1 attributed the difficulty to the fact that such words are rarely spoken. The difficulty therefore seems related not only to word length but also to unfamiliarity and limited exposure, which corresponds with the importance of repeated exposure (Nation, 2001; Webb & Nation, 2017). Thornbury's (2004) explanation is that unfamiliar and complex words may be harder to learn, particularly when learners have insufficient exposure. Grammar was mentioned mainly in relation to using words in sentences, which fits the moderate means of Q12 and Q13.

Connotation.

Connotation had the lowest overall mean (3.46), although it remained in the high category. Understanding implied meanings in context (Q15, M = 3.54) was harder than identifying positive or negative connotations (Q14, M = 3.37, moderate). Students understood literal meanings but struggled when a word or expression carried another meaning, as with idioms (*break a leg*, *how are you*) and familiar words with an evaluative meaning:

> **P1:** "*Yes, definitely, especially when it contains idioms. For example, the first time I heard the idiom 'Break a leg', I was shocked and confused; it turns out it is a way to encourage someone before a performance. If we do not know the implied meaning, there is no way we can know the right meaning.*"
> **P2:** "*I often find it difficult to understand implied meanings because the meaning is not the same as the actual meaning. For example, the expression 'How are you'*"
> **P4:** "*For example, the word 'cold'. At first I only knew it meant cold. But 'cold person'. I was confused because it turned out it did not mean cold temperature, but a person who is unfriendly or does not care.*"
> **P6:** *At first I was confused because there is the word 'bright'. I knew it meant bright as in light, but in some sentences it turns out it can mean smart.*"

Similar examples were given for *bright*, which can mean intelligent. These accounts agree with Thornbury's (2004) point that sensitivity to connotation and idiomatic expressions is part of knowing a word. Participants rarely described positive or negative connotation as such, which fits its moderate mean.

Appropriate use.

Appropriate use was the second-highest aspect (M = 3.60). All three items were high: using words in different contexts (Q16, M = 3.73), direct translation from

Indonesian (Q18, M = 3.56), and choosing the correct word (Q17, M = 3.51). Interviews showed that students often knew what a word meant but were unsure whether they used it correctly, which led some to avoid new words:

> **P1:** *"Then the second one is how to use it correctly in context. I know the meaning, but when it comes to grammar, I get confused."*
> **P2:** *"Yes, I often have difficulty constructing English sentences because I still lack understanding of grammar and the proper use of vocabulary."*
> **P5:** *"I often get confused about choosing the right word. For example, I know that two words have almost the same meaning, but it turns out their usage is different. I am also often confused about grammar when using certain vocabulary."*
> **P4:** *"Sometimes I know the meaning but do not know whether the usage is correct or not. As a result, I prefer to use words that are already familiar, or whatever comes to mind, rather than trying new vocabulary."*
> **P6:** *"I often translate directly from Indonesian into English. As a result, the sentences I make sometimes sound strange or unnatural."*

Knowing a word's meaning therefore did not guarantee that students could use it. This supports the view that vocabulary knowledge involves the ability to use words appropriately, not merely recognise their meanings (Nation, 2001), and aligns with Salam and Nurnisa (2021), who linked memorisation without context to difficulty using words actively. Because this dimension has been little explored in earlier studies, it is an additional contribution of the present study.

Effects of Vocabulary Learning Difficulties on Students' English Learning

The interviews showed that vocabulary difficulties were associated with five effects on students' English learning.

Reduced confidence and classroom participation. Participants felt nervous and afraid of making mistakes, so some hesitated to answer questions or remained silent. **P1** said, "...I become nervous because I am afraid of making mistakes, so I rarely raise my hand..."; **P2** said, "In class, I usually prefer to remain silent because I am afraid of making mistakes "; P5 said, "When giving a presentation or speaking in front of the class, I often feel nervous. I am afraid of pronouncing words incorrectly or choosing the wrong vocabulary. Sometimes, I become less active in classroom discussions." **P6** said, "I often spend too much time thinking because I am afraid of using the wrong word. As a result, I become less confident." Uncertainty about a word's form or use may thus discourage students from taking part, although this study does not establish a causal relationship. Thornbury's (2004) explained pronunciation and appropriate-use difficulties. When students are uncertain about a word's form or use, they may struggle to express themselves confidently. Nation (2001) similarly emphasizes the importance of vocabulary knowledge for communication.

Reading comprehension. Unfamiliar words interrupted reading and required extra time. **P1** said, "I have to spend twice as much time completing the material because I frequently need to look up the meanings of words." **P2** said, "Sometimes, I focus too much on finding the meaning of one word until I lose focus on understanding the text as a whole." **P5** said, "When reading, I also have to stop and pause to look up the meanings of words I do not understand.", and **P3** reported losing focus on the whole text while searching for one word. This aligns with the role of vocabulary in understanding written language (Nation, 2001) and with Rahmawati et al. (2021), who linked low vocabulary mastery to weaker performance in English.

Speaking performance. Students forgot words they wanted to use, hesitated, and felt unsure about pronunciation and word choice. **P4** explained, "When speaking, I am less fluent because I have to think first about the meaning and use of words." **P2** said, "...I often forget the vocabulary I want to use and still feel afraid and embarrassed about making pronunciation mistakes." **P3** said, "...sometimes I need more time to express my ideas in English.", and **P5** said, "When giving a presentation or speaking in front of the class, I often feel nervous." Speaking requires fast word retrieval and selection, so difficulty in either process slows expression and lowers fluency (Alqahtani, 2015; Richards & Renandya, 2002).

Writing activities. Students struggled to choose suitable words, avoid repetition, and construct sentences. P1 said, "When writing and speaking, my limited vocabulary restricts me. I usually repeat the same words," **P2** said, "...I often choose the wrong vocabulary when writing assignments or making sentences, " P5 said, "I often need a long time to construct sentences.", and **P6** spent more time choosing appropriate words. Writing demands attention to meaning, grammar, and contextual fit at once, which corresponds with Thornbury's (2004) discussion of grammatical and appropriate-use difficulties.

Understanding of lessons and learning progress. Students needed more time to understand reading materials and new vocabulary. **P2** said, "...I need more time to understand reading lessons and construct sentences correctly." **P3** said, "...I need more time to understand new vocabulary...", and **P6** felt that "my English skills develop more slowly than I expected." These effects should be read as experiences reported by the participants rather than measured changes in academic achievement. Schmitt (2000) explains that vocabulary knowledge and the ability to retrieve words are important components of effective language learning.

The Most Dominant Vocabulary Learning Difficulty

Table 6 and Figure 1 compare the five aspects. All were in the high category, and meaning ranked first with a mean of 3.62, followed by appropriate use (3.60), pronunciation and spelling (3.58), length, complexity and grammar (3.58), and connotation (3.46). The differences among the means were small, so meaning should be read as the aspect with the greatest reported difficulty rather than as a difficulty far above the others.

Table 6. Comparison of the Five Aspects of Vocabulary Learning Difficulty

Rank	Aspect	No. of items	Mean	Level
1	Meaning	4	3.62	High
2	Appropriate use	3	3.60	High
3	Pronunciation and spelling	5	3.58	High
4	Length, complexity, and grammar	4	3.58	High
5	Connotation	2	3.46	High

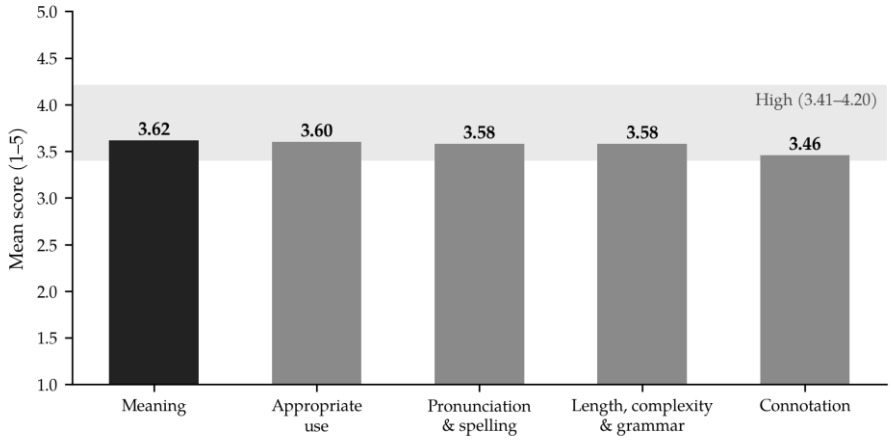


Figure 1. Mean scores of the five aspects of vocabulary learning difficulty

The interviews help explain why meaning ranked first. Students described words with multiple meanings (run as movement and in run a business; bank as a financial institution or a river bank), words with similar forms or meanings (borrow and lend; accept and except), and the loss of meanings that were not reused. These accounts are consistent with Q9, the highest-scoring item, and with Schmitt's (2000) view that vocabulary learning involves encoding, storing, and retrieving word knowledge. Nation's (2001) view that meaning is an essential dimension of vocabulary knowledge.

All 18 questionnaire items were valid and reliable, as shown in Tables 3 and 4, so all items were retained. Table 5 shows that students reported high-level difficulties in all five aspects, with only three items falling in the moderate category. The following narrative synthesizes the patterns rather than repeating every item mean already presented in the table. Pronunciation and spelling difficulties centered on the mismatch between written and spoken forms and on silent letters; interview accounts of "Wednesday" and "honest" showed that irregular spelling-to-sound correspondences reduced students' confidence when speaking (Thornbury, 2004; Salam & Nurnisa, 2021). Meaning was the highest-rated aspect; students reported multiple meanings such as "bank," similar forms such as "accept" and "except," and forgetting words that were not reused, indicating that vocabulary knowledge requires recognition, storage, and retrieval in context (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2000; Hasan, 2024; Salam & Nurnisa, 2021). Length, complexity, and grammar difficulties were driven mainly by unfamiliar and complex words, while grammatical form and word-form confusion were only moderate; this pattern reflects limited exposure and the need for repeated encounters with words (Nation, 2001; Webb & Nation, 2017; Thornbury, 2004). Connotation was rated lowest but remained high; students understood literal meanings but struggled with idioms such as "break a leg" and evaluative extensions such as "cold person" and "bright," consistent with Thornbury's (2004) account of connotation and idiomatic meaning. Appropriate use was the second-highest aspect; students often knew a word's meaning but were unsure about grammar, context, and direct translation from Indonesian, which supports the view that word knowledge includes use rather than mere recognition (Nation, 2001; Salam & Nurnisa, 2021).

The interviews also showed five reported effects of vocabulary difficulties on students' English learning: reduced confidence and classroom participation, interrupted reading comprehension, weaker speaking performance, difficulty in writing, and slower perceived learning progress. Students hesitated to answer or

speak because they feared making pronunciation or word-choice errors, lost focus while looking up unfamiliar words during reading, forgot words they wanted to use in speaking, repeated limited vocabulary in writing, and needed more time to understand lessons. These effects should be read as students' self-reported experiences rather than measured causal changes in achievement, and they align with the role of vocabulary knowledge in communication and comprehension (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2000; Thornbury, 2004).

Among the five aspects, meaning was the most dominant difficulty, followed closely by appropriate use and pronunciation and spelling, while connotation was the lowest but still in the high category, as shown in Table 6 and Figure 1. Because the differences among the means were small, meaning should be interpreted as the aspect with the greatest reported difficulty rather than as a difficulty far above the others. Interview accounts explained this ranking through students' problems with multiple meanings, similar words such as "borrow" and "lend" or "accept" and "except," and poor retention of previously learned meanings. This result is consistent with Schmitt's (2000) view that vocabulary learning involves encoding, storing, and retrieving word knowledge and with Nation's (2001) view that meaning is an essential dimension of vocabulary knowledge. It also agrees with Hasan (2024) and Salam and Nurnisa (2021), while the present study adds a detailed account of meaning difficulties among eleventh-grade students by combining questionnaire and interview evidence and by comparing meaning with four other aspects.

CONCLUSION

Eleventh-grade students of SMAN 1 Kediri experienced high-level difficulties in all five aspects of English vocabulary learning examined: pronunciation and spelling, meaning, length, complexity and grammar, connotation, and appropriate use. The interviews showed that these difficulties involved mismatches between spelling and pronunciation, forgetting and confusing word meanings, unfamiliar and complex words, interpreting implied meanings, and choosing words appropriately in different contexts, indicating that vocabulary learning involves more than memorising words. The difficulties were reported to reduce students' confidence and classroom participation and to affect their reading, speaking, writing, and perceived progress in learning. These difficulties affected students' confidence, classroom participation, reading comprehension, speaking, writing, and understanding of English lessons. Students often hesitated to participate because they feared making mistakes, and unfamiliar vocabulary made reading and completing assignments more challenging. In speaking and writing, they struggled to retrieve words, choose appropriate vocabulary, and construct sentences correctly.

Among the five aspects, Meaning was the most dominant difficulty (M = 3.62), followed by appropriate use (3.60), pronunciation and spelling (3.58), length, complexity and grammar (3.58), and connotation (3.46). Interview accounts of multiple meanings, similar words, and poor retention supported this ranking. The interview findings supported this result by showing that students had difficulty remembering word meanings, distinguishing similar words such as borrow and lend and accept and except, and understanding words with multiple meanings, such as bank. Because the study was limited to one school, the differences among aspect means were small, and the effects were based on students' self-reports, the findings

should be interpreted as contextual. Therefore, the findings indicate that understanding, remembering, and applying word meanings appropriately were the most prominent challenges in English vocabulary learning among the eleventh-grade students of SMAN 1 Kediri.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, several recommendations can be proposed. First, students are encouraged to go beyond memorisation by reviewing learned words regularly, learning words in sentences and meaningful contexts, improving understanding and retention, practising pronunciation and spelling, and using new words in speaking and writing, with particular attention to word meanings. Second, English teachers should provide contextualized vocabulary activities, pronunciation exercises, and repeated practice, especially for words with multiple or similar meanings, and create a supportive classroom where students are comfortable making mistakes and are allowed to practice English confidently. Third, Schools should provide adequate vocabulary-learning resources, reading materials, and chances to practice English, and support teachers in developing varied activities to improve students' vocabulary use in reading, speaking, writing, and other classroom activities. Finally, future researchers are encouraged to conduct similar studies involving different grade levels, schools, or educational contexts, and to explore vocabulary learning strategies through classroom observations, vocabulary tests, or longitudinal designs to measure the effects of vocabulary difficulties on actual achievement.

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