

STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN LEARNING ENGLISH AND MANDARIN VOCABULARY AMONG JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

ERWIN LIJAYA

IKIP WIDYA DARMA SURABAYA

AMIATUN NURYANA

IKIP WIDYA DARMA SURABAYA

Abstract: Vocabulary is a fundamental component of foreign language learning because it supports learners' ability to understand, produce, and negotiate meaning in communication. This study aims to identify junior high school students' difficulties in learning English and Mandarin vocabulary, compare their vocabulary achievement in both languages, and determine which language is more challenging for students. The study employed a quantitative descriptive design. Data were collected through vocabulary tests and a questionnaire distributed online to 28 junior high school students. The data were analyzed using frequency, percentage, and mean score. The findings show that students achieved a higher mean score in English vocabulary (9.96 out of 10) than in Mandarin vocabulary (8.86 out of 10). The result indicates that Mandarin vocabulary is relatively more challenging because students need to recognize Hanzi, understand tonal pronunciation, and memorize unfamiliar orthographic forms. The study suggests that teachers should combine repetition, contextualized practice, visual character support, and interactive vocabulary activities to improve students' vocabulary mastery in both English and Mandarin.

Keywords: *Vocabulary learning; English vocabulary; Mandarin vocabulary; Hanzi; learning difficulties; junior high school students*

INTRODUCTION

Language learning requires sufficient vocabulary knowledge because words are the basic units through which learners understand messages, build sentences, and express ideas. Vocabulary mastery influences listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and it is often considered one of the strongest indicators of foreign language proficiency (Nation, 2013;

Qian, 2002; Schmitt, 2010). In the Indonesian educational context, limited vocabulary knowledge has long been reported as an obstacle for learners who need to access academic and communicative English (Nurweni & Read, 1999).

English and Mandarin are two important foreign languages for Indonesian students. English is widely used in

international communication, education, technology, and academic resources, whereas Mandarin has become increasingly relevant due to China's growing influence in business, trade, tourism, and cross-cultural communication. However, learning vocabulary in these two languages does not involve the same type of difficulty. English vocabulary requires learners to understand spelling, pronunciation, meaning, and usage, while Mandarin vocabulary requires learners to connect meaning with tonal pronunciation and Chinese characters or Hanzi (Everson, 1998; Ke, 1998; Shen, 2005).

Previous studies in vocabulary learning have shown that vocabulary acquisition is affected by exposure, repetition, context, learning strategies, and the depth of lexical knowledge (Gu, 2003; Laufer & Nation, 1995; Schmitt, 2008; Webb, 2007, 2008). In English, students may find difficulties because spelling and pronunciation are not always consistent. In Mandarin, the challenge may be greater because learners must recognize visual character forms, distinguish tones, and remember the relationship among sound, form, and meaning (Su & Kim, 2014; Yang, 2022; Zhu & Wang, 2022).

Based on these issues, this study investigates students' difficulties in learning English and Mandarin vocabulary among junior high school students. The objectives of the study are: (1) to identify students' difficulties in learning English vocabulary;

(2) to identify students' difficulties in learning Mandarin vocabulary; (3) to compare students' vocabulary achievement in English and Mandarin; and (4) to determine which language is more challenging for students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vocabulary Learning

Vocabulary refers to the words that learners understand and use in communication. It includes not only word meaning but also spelling, pronunciation, grammatical function, collocation, and appropriate use in context. Nation (2013) explains that vocabulary knowledge involves form, meaning, and use; therefore, vocabulary learning is not limited to memorizing word lists. Schmitt (2010) also emphasizes that vocabulary knowledge develops gradually through repeated exposure and meaningful use.

Vocabulary learning may occur intentionally through direct instruction or incidentally through reading, listening, and contextual exposure. Repetition is important because repeated encounters with target words can strengthen retention and recognition (Webb, 2007). Context also helps learners infer meaning and build deeper lexical understanding, especially when

texts provide adequate contextual clues (Nagy et al., 1985; Webb, 2008).

English Vocabulary Learning

English vocabulary learning requires learners to understand pronunciation, spelling, meaning, word class, and usage. Richards and Renandya (2002) state that vocabulary is a core component of language proficiency and provides much of the basis for how learners speak, listen, read, and write. However, English spelling and pronunciation may create difficulties because the relationship between written forms and sounds is not always predictable.

For junior high school students, English vocabulary can be supported through contextualized teaching, repetition, visual media, games, and communicative activities. Thornbury (2002) argues that effective vocabulary teaching should help learners notice words, retrieve them repeatedly, and use them in meaningful contexts. Oxford (1990) and Gu (2003) further highlight that vocabulary strategies, such as grouping, guessing from context, and self-monitoring, can assist learners in developing lexical competence.

Mandarin Vocabulary Learning

Mandarin vocabulary learning is different from English vocabulary learning because learners must deal with tones, Pinyin, and Chinese characters. Hanzi represents meaning and sound in a logographic writing system, so learners need to recognize shapes, strokes, radicals, and the relationship between written forms and pronunciation. Studies on Chinese as a foreign language show that character recognition and pronunciation are closely related to word knowledge (Everson, 1998; Ke, 1998).

Chinese characters can be difficult for non-native learners because characters contain visual forms that are not alphabetic. Shen (2005) found that non-native learners use various strategies to memorize Chinese characters, while Su and Kim (2014) show that semantic radical knowledge is related to word recognition in Chinese. Yang (2022) also reports that teenage beginners often perceive Chinese characters as challenging but learn them more effectively when they use clear strategies and meaningful practice.

Learning Difficulties

Learning difficulties refer to barriers that hinder students from

achieving learning objectives effectively. These difficulties may arise from linguistic complexity, limited exposure, weak motivation, memory limitations, and instructional methods. In vocabulary learning, students may know a word superficially but still fail to use it accurately in context, which shows the difference between vocabulary breadth and vocabulary depth (Laufer, 1997; Qian, 2002).

In this study, difficulties are examined through students' performance in English and Mandarin vocabulary tests and their responses to a questionnaire. The comparison between English and Mandarin vocabulary is important because both languages have different linguistic systems and require different learning strategies.

METODE PENELITIAN

This study employed a quantitative descriptive research design. A descriptive design was used because the study aimed to describe students' vocabulary achievement and learning difficulties without manipulating the learning environment. Quantitative descriptive research is appropriate when researchers intend to summarize numerical data through frequency,

percentage, and mean score (Ary et al., 2010; Creswell, 2014).

The participants consisted of 28 junior high school students who completed the online questionnaire and vocabulary tests. The participants were selected because they had experience learning basic English and Mandarin vocabulary.

The research instruments consisted of an English vocabulary test, a Mandarin vocabulary test, and a questionnaire. The English vocabulary test consisted of 10 multiple-choice questions covering basic vocabulary such as apple, teacher, school, beautiful, friend, family, water, book, house, and happy. The Mandarin vocabulary test consisted of 10 multiple-choice questions covering basic Mandarin vocabulary, including 苹果 (píngguǒ), 老师 (lǎoshī), 学校 (xuéxiào), 快乐 (kuàilè), 家庭 (jiāting), 漂亮 (piàoliang), 朋友 (péngyou), 水 (shuǐ), 家 (jiā), and 书 (shū).

The questionnaire consisted of 10 statements regarding students' difficulties in learning English and Mandarin vocabulary using a Likert scale. The use of questionnaire data was intended to support the test results by

showing students' perceived difficulties. The collected data were analyzed using frequency, percentage, and mean score. This procedure is consistent with basic descriptive analysis in applied linguistics research (Dörnyei, 2007).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

English Vocabulary Test Results

The English vocabulary test results showed that students performed very well. The average score was 9.96 out of 10. This result indicates that most students had a strong understanding of basic English vocabulary. Students were generally able to identify the correct meanings of common English words used in the test.

The high score may be related to students' familiarity with English words through school lessons, media exposure, digital platforms, and daily contact with English expressions. This supports the view that frequent exposure and repeated retrieval help strengthen vocabulary retention (Schmitt, 2008; Webb, 2007).

Table 1. English Vocabulary Test Results

Item	Score
Mean Score	9.96
Maximum Score	10
Number of Students	28

Mandarin Vocabulary Test Results

The Mandarin vocabulary test also showed positive results, but the average score was lower than the English vocabulary test. The mean score for Mandarin vocabulary was 8.86 out of 10. This result indicates that students generally understood basic Mandarin vocabulary but still experienced more difficulty than in English.

The lower Mandarin score can be explained by the complexity of Hanzi and tones. Unlike English, Mandarin vocabulary learning requires students to connect meaning with Pinyin, tonal pronunciation, and character recognition. This finding is consistent with studies showing that Chinese character recognition is challenging for non-native learners because learners need to process visual, phonological, and semantic information at the same time (Everson, 1998; Ke, 1998; Shen, 2005).

Table 2. Mandarin Vocabulary Test Results

Item	Score
Mean Score	8.86
Maximum Score	10
Number of Students	28

Comparison Between English and Mandarin Vocabulary

Table 3. Comparison of Mean Scores

Language	Mean Score
English	9.96
Mandarin	8.86

The comparison of mean scores shows that students performed better in English vocabulary than in Mandarin vocabulary. English obtained a mean score of 9.96, while Mandarin obtained a mean score of 8.86. The difference suggests that Mandarin vocabulary is more challenging for the students in this study.

Questionnaire responses also indicated that students experienced difficulties in memorizing Mandarin vocabulary, recognizing Chinese characters, and understanding tones. These difficulties are understandable because Mandarin vocabulary learning requires more than memorizing meaning; it requires learners to build connections between character form, sound, tone, and usage (Su & Kim, 2014; Yang, 2022; Zhu & Wang, 2022).

Nevertheless, the Mandarin score was still relatively high. This suggests that students can learn Mandarin vocabulary successfully when the materials are basic and when instruction provides sufficient support. Teachers can help students by using visual character explanation, radical-based learning, repetition, pronunciation practice, and contextualized vocabulary tasks.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMENDATION

This study investigated students' difficulties in learning English and Mandarin vocabulary among junior high school students. The findings showed that students achieved higher scores in English vocabulary than in Mandarin vocabulary.

The mean score for English vocabulary was 9.96, while the mean score for Mandarin vocabulary was 8.86. These results indicate that Mandarin vocabulary presents greater learning challenges for students, especially because of Hanzi recognition, tonal pronunciation, and memorization of unfamiliar written forms.

The study implies that vocabulary teaching should not rely only on memorization. Teachers should provide repeated exposure, contextualized practice, visual support, pronunciation drills, and interactive learning activities. For Mandarin vocabulary, teachers should also introduce Hanzi gradually through radicals, stroke patterns, and meaningful examples. Future studies are recommended to involve a larger sample, classroom observation, and

more detailed analysis of students' vocabulary learning strategies.

REFERENCE

- Ary, D., Jacobs, L. C., Sorensen, C., & Razavieh, A. (2010). *Introduction to research in education* (8th ed.). Wadsworth.
- Brown, H. D. (2007). *Principles of language learning and teaching* (5th ed.). Pearson Longman.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies*. Oxford University Press.
- Everson, M. E. (1998). Word recognition among learners of Chinese as a foreign language: Investigating the relationship between naming and knowing. *The Modern Language Journal*, 82(2), 194-204.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1998.tb01192.x>
- Gu, P. Y. (2003). Vocabulary learning in a second language: Person, task, context and strategies. *TESL-EJ*, 7(2), 1-25.
- Ke, C. (1998). Effects of language background on the learning of Chinese characters among foreign language students. *Foreign Language Annals*, 31(1), 91-102.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.1998.tb01335.x>
- Laufer, B. (1997). The lexical plight in second language reading: Words you do not know, words you think you know, and words you cannot guess. In J. Coady & T. Huckin (Eds.), *Second language vocabulary acquisition: A rationale for pedagogy* (pp. 20-34). Cambridge University Press.
- Laufer, B., & Nation, P. (1995). Vocabulary size and use: Lexical richness in L2 written production. *Applied Linguistics*, 16(3), 307-322.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/16.3.307>
- Nagy, W. E., Herman, P. A., & Anderson, R. C. (1985). Learning words from context. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 20(2), 233-253.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/747758>
- Nation, I. S. P. (2013). *Learning vocabulary in another language* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Nurweni, A., & Read, J. (1999). The English vocabulary knowledge of Indonesian university students. *English for Specific Purposes*, 18(2), 161-175.
- Oxford, R. L. (1990). *Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know*. Heinle & Heinle.
- Qian, D. D. (2002). Investigating the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and academic reading performance: An assessment perspective. *Language Learning*, 52(3), 513-536.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9922.00193>
- Richards, J. C., & Renandya, W. A. (Eds.). (2002). *Methodology in language teaching: An anthology of current practice*. Cambridge University Press.

- <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511667190>
- Schmitt, N. (2008). Instructed second language vocabulary learning. *Language Teaching Research*, 12(3), 329-363. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168808089921>
- Schmitt, N. (2010). *Researching vocabulary: A vocabulary research manual*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Shen, H. H. (2005). An investigation of Chinese-character learning strategies among non-native speakers of Chinese. *System*, 33(1), 49-68. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2004.11.001>
- Su, X., & Kim, Y. S. (2014). Semantic radical knowledge and word recognition in Chinese for Chinese as foreign language learners. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 26(1), 131-152. <https://doi.org/10.64152/10125/66690>
- Thornbury, S. (2002). *How to teach vocabulary*. Pearson Education Limited.
- Webb, S. (2007). The effects of repetition on vocabulary knowledge. *Applied Linguistics*, 28(1), 46-65. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/aml048>
- Webb, S. (2008). The effects of context on incidental vocabulary learning. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 20(2), 232-245. <https://doi.org/10.64152/10125/66826>
- Webb, S., & Nation, P. (2017). *How vocabulary is learned*. Oxford University Press.
- Yang, J. (2022). Teenage beginners' perceptions of learning Chinese characters: A case study. *Journal of Chinese Writing Systems*, 6(1), 3-15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/25138502221050960>
- Zhu, S., & Wang, C. (2022). Vocabulary learning in Chinese as a second language: Exploring the role of self-regulation in facilitating vocabulary knowledge of second language learners. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 893900. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.893900>