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Teachers' Challenges in Teaching English Vocabulary in Rural Elementary School in Bojonegoro

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Abstract—In English language learning, vocabulary plays a crucial role and is widely regarded as the foundation of the language. Without adequate vocabulary knowledge, students may struggle to express ideas, understand written texts, or comprehend spoken language effectively. English vocabulary learning in rural areas faces various obstacles, ranging from limited facilities, teachers' educational backgrounds that are not from English Language Education study programs, to low student motivation. This study aims to explore the challenges faced by teachers in teaching English vocabulary in rural elementary schools in Bojonegoro Regency. This study used a descriptive qualitative approach with data collection techniques through semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation. The study was conducted at SDN Ngablak 1 and MI Al-Islam, two elementary schools located in Ngablak Village, Dander District, Bojonegoro. The results showed that teachers face four main categories of challenges: pedagogical, professional, institutional-contextual, and student-related challenges. Factors contributing to these challenges include student factors, teacher factors, school facilities, and environmental factors. The implications of this study emphasize the need for more innovative vocabulary learning strategies, adequate professional training, and improved learning facilities that support effective English language learning in rural elementary schools.

Keywords—Teacher challenges, English vocabulary, Rural elementary school

abstrak—Dalam pembelajaran bahasa Inggris, kosakata memainkan peran penting dan secara luas dianggap sebagai fondasi bahasa. Tanpa pengetahuan kosakata yang memadai, siswa mungkin kesulitan untuk mengungkapkan ide, memahami teks tertulis, atau memahami bahasa lisan secara efektif. Pembelajaran kosakata bahasa Inggris di daerah pedesaan menghadapi berbagai kendala, mulai dari fasilitas yang terbatas, latar belakang pendidikan guru yang bukan dari program studi Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris, hingga motivasi siswa yang rendah. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi tantangan yang dihadapi guru dalam mengajar kosakata bahasa Inggris di sekolah dasar pedesaan di Kabupaten Bojonegoro. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif dengan teknik pengumpulan data melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dan observasi non-partisipan. Penelitian ini dilakukan di SDN Ngablak 1 dan MI Al-Islam, dua sekolah dasar yang terletak di Desa Ngablak, Kecamatan Dander, Bojonegoro. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa guru menghadapi empat kategori tantangan utama: tantangan pedagogis, profesional, institusional-kontekstual, dan tantangan yang berkaitan dengan siswa.

Faktor-faktor yang berkontribusi terhadap tantangan ini meliputi faktor siswa, faktor guru, fasilitas sekolah, dan faktor lingkungan. Implikasi dari penelitian ini menekankan perlunya strategi pembelajaran kosakata yang lebih inovatif, pelatihan profesional yang memadai, dan fasilitas pembelajaran yang lebih baik untuk mendukung pembelajaran bahasa Inggris yang efektif di sekolah dasar pedesaan.

Kata Kunci – Tantangan guru, Kosakata bahasa Inggris, Sekolah dasar pedesaan

INTRODUCTION

In the age of globalization and rapid technological advancement, English mastery has become a crucial necessity rather than just a valuable asset. As a global lingua franca, English plays an important role in business, science, technology, and academic fields, allowing people to access wider educational and professional opportunities (Thompson, 2024). Recognizing the crucial role of English in global communication, the Indonesian government has initiated efforts to develop English literacy at an early age in order to enhance national human resource competitiveness.

Vocabulary is widely recognized as the cornerstone of language learning, serving as the primary building block upon which all language skills are constructed. Learners with limited vocabulary knowledge frequently encounter difficulties in expressing themselves, comprehending written materials, and processing spoken discourse. A rich vocabulary enables students to develop both productive competencies—speaking and writing—as well as receptive abilities such as reading and listening. For young learners in particular, early vocabulary acquisition is foundational, as it underpins basic language comprehension and shapes the trajectory of long-term language development. Consequently, providing effective and purposeful vocabulary instruction is essential to fostering students' English proficiency and building their confidence as language learners.

However, teaching English vocabulary to young learners is not an easy task, especially in rural elementary schools. Teachers often face various challenges related to limited learning resources, inadequate teaching media, low student motivation, and the dominance of traditional teaching methods that emphasize memorization rather than meaningful communication. Rural schools are often characterized by limited educational facilities, insufficient learning resources, restricted access to technology, and fewer opportunities for teacher professional development (Kulkarni, 2015; Azano

et al., 2017). As a result, English vocabulary learning in rural classrooms is often less interactive and less effective.

Initial observations conducted at SDN Ngablak 1 and MI Al-Islam in Bojonegoro revealed that students still experienced difficulties in learning English vocabulary. Many students showed low motivation and depended heavily on memorization activities during classroom learning. In addition, teachers had limited instructional media and tended to apply less engaging teaching strategies, which reduced students' participation in the learning process. These conditions indicate a gap between the expected goals of English language learning and the actual classroom practices in rural elementary schools.

Several previous studies have discussed the challenges of teaching English in rural schools. Suardi & Sakti (2019) found that teachers experienced difficulties in selecting appropriate vocabulary materials and implementing effective teaching strategies. Laila et al (2023) reported that English teaching in rural elementary schools faced challenges related to limited facilities, teacher shortages, and students' low motivation. Furthermore, Mariyam et al (2025) identified infrastructural limitations and lack of professional support as major obstacles in rural English language teaching. However, most previous studies focused on general English teaching or secondary school contexts. Studies specifically investigating teachers' challenges in teaching English vocabulary at rural elementary schools remain limited, particularly in the context of Bojonegoro, East Java.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the challenges teachers face when teaching English vocabulary in rural elementary schools, and to identify the factors contributing to those challenges, specifically at SDN Ngablak 1 and MI Al-Islam. This study is expected to provide a deeper understanding of the pedagogical and contextual challenges experienced by teachers and contribute to the improvement of English vocabulary instruction for young learners in rural educational settings.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the challenges faced by teachers in teaching English vocabulary in rural elementary

schools in Bojonegoro. This approach was selected because the study did not aim to test hypotheses or examine relationships between variables, but rather to describe and understand educational phenomena based on teachers' experiences, perceptions, and classroom practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research was conducted at two schools located in Ngablak Village, Dander District, Bojonegoro Regency: SDN Ngablak 1 and MI Al-Islam. These schools were chosen because they represent elementary schools in rural areas with unique characteristics in implementing English vocabulary instruction. The limited number of teachers in rural schools also means that teachers are often required to teach multiple subjects, including English, even outside their area of expertise.

Data were collected through two main techniques: semi-structured interviews and non-participant observation. The research subjects consisted of two English teachers, one from each school who were directly involved in teaching English vocabulary to fifth-grade students. Data analysis followed the qualitative model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) comprising three stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data validity was ensured through two forms of triangulation. Technical triangulation was achieved by cross-checking findings obtained from interviews against data gathered through classroom observation, allowing inconsistencies between reported practices and actual classroom behavior to be identified. Source triangulation was carried out by comparing responses from the two participating teachers at different schools, enabling the researchers to confirm patterns that appeared consistently across both contexts rather than being specific to a single informant.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Challenges Faced by Teachers in Teaching English Vocabulary

Pedagogical Challenges

The data analysis indicated that both teachers predominantly employed conventional instructional strategies, including vocabulary translation, memorization drills, repetition exercises, and question-and-answer activities. Teacher 1 reported that

her primary approaches centered on translating words using dictionaries and writing explanations on the whiteboard, while Teacher 2 incorporated repetition, read-aloud tasks, and daily memorization of five new words. Although Teacher 2 occasionally introduced vocabulary games, flashcards, and YouTube videos, both teachers' practices remained largely teacher-centered and focused on vocabulary recognition rather than communicative production.

Classroom observations corroborated these interview findings. Students generally demonstrated receptive vocabulary mastery; they could recognize and repeat target words but showed limited ability to employ vocabulary independently in speaking or writing contexts. Pronunciation also emerged as a recurring difficulty, as students struggled with the inconsistency between English spelling and pronunciation, which in turn reduced their willingness to participate in oral activities.

These findings indicate that vocabulary instruction in both schools still emphasized recognition and memorization rather than communicative language use. As a result, students developed receptive vocabulary mastery more strongly than productive vocabulary skills. This condition is consistent with Šišková (2016) who explained that EFL learners generally develop receptive vocabulary knowledge earlier than productive vocabulary knowledge. Furthermore, Laila et al (2023) reported that teachers in rural elementary schools often rely on traditional teaching approaches because of limited facilities and students' low English proficiency. This finding also supports the study by Sari et al (2024) which found that vocabulary instruction in elementary schools often depends on teacher-selected strategies and that limited instructional variation may reduce students' engagement in vocabulary learning. Therefore, more interactive and meaningful vocabulary learning activities are needed to encourage students' active language use.

Professional Challenges

Both teachers acknowledged that their academic backgrounds were outside the field of English education: Teacher 1 held a degree in Mathematics Education and Teacher 2 in Primary School Teacher Education (PGSD). Consequently, both experienced difficulties in fully mastering English content knowledge and in designing innovative instructional strategies. They also reported having never participated in specialized

professional training focused on English vocabulary instruction for young learners, which constrained their confidence and creativity in implementing student-centered approaches.

Observations supported these findings, showing that teaching practices were largely restricted to repetition-based and textbook-driven activities. To compensate, both teachers engaged in independent self-improvement by studying materials in advance and experimenting with games and reward systems.

This pattern is consistent with Nasution et al (2023) who identified teacher competence and inadequate professional preparation as primary challenges in rural English instruction. Nety et al (2026) similarly found that rural teachers frequently teach English without specialized backgrounds and with minimal institutional professional development. Yolanda and Maisarah (2025) also reported that rural teachers tend to rely on personal initiative rather than formal training given the limited institutional support available to them.

Institutional and Contextual Challenges

Both schools provided only basic instructional resources; textbooks, dictionaries, and whiteboards, without access to digital tools such as projectors, computers, or smart televisions. Teachers identified the absence of technology-supported media as a significant barrier to creating interactive and engaging vocabulary lessons. This finding is also supported by Rahmawati et al (2025) who reported that the use of contextual and interactive vocabulary learning media could significantly improve students' engagement and vocabulary acquisition in elementary school settings. Consequently, limited access to educational technology restricted opportunities for more meaningful vocabulary learning experiences. Additionally, English was classified as local content (*muatan lokal*), resulting in a restricted instructional time allocation. This limitation reduced opportunities for vocabulary reinforcement and communicative practice.

Contextual factors also played a role: both schools were situated in rural residential areas where students had minimal exposure to English outside the classroom. English was rarely used in daily communication, meaning that vocabulary learning was largely confined to scheduled class sessions.

These findings are consistent with Supriadi et al (2023) who explained that rural schools frequently lack adequate educational facilities and authentic English learning environments, leading to predominantly textbook-centered instruction. Ristha Octavia and Yuli Astutik (2026) further emphasized that the absence of interactive media in elementary English classrooms reduces student participation and comprehension, and that technology-integrated approaches yield stronger engagement and vocabulary acquisition outcomes.

Student-Related Challenges

The findings revealed that students exhibited varying levels of vocabulary mastery. Some learners were able to grasp new words quickly, while others required repeated explanations and relied heavily on dictionaries. Low learning motivation and weak memory retention were identified as the most prevalent student-related challenges. Students rarely reviewed or used English vocabulary outside class, which limited their vocabulary growth and reduced their confidence in speaking.

Observations confirmed that many students were passive during lessons and could recognize vocabulary items but struggled to produce them spontaneously in communicative contexts. The heterogeneity of students' proficiency within a single classroom also posed difficulties for teachers in managing differentiated instruction effectively.

These findings resonate with Alfiani et al (2025) who found that rural elementary students often demonstrate low motivation and limited vocabulary mastery due to minimal English use in their surroundings. Ilvia Habsah et al (2025) also confirmed that low motivation, limited teaching variety, and insufficient learning support are primary causes of weak vocabulary mastery in elementary settings.

Factors Contributing to the Challenges

The findings demonstrate that challenges in teaching English vocabulary in rural elementary schools are multidimensional and interconnected. Student-related factors such as low motivation and limited English exposure interacted with teacher-related factors, including limited professional preparation and instructional variation. These conditions were further intensified by institutional limitations, particularly the lack of interactive learning media and restricted instructional time. Consequently,

vocabulary learning remained heavily dependent on conventional classroom instruction and provided limited opportunities for communicative language practice.

Teacher-related factors were equally significant. The absence of an English education background among both teachers resulted in partial content mastery and limited pedagogical flexibility. Without access to targeted professional development, teachers were compelled to rely on self-directed learning to compensate for gaps in their preparation. Although they made creative efforts – incorporating games, reward systems, and media when possible – the absence of structured support constrained the range and quality of their instructional strategies.

Institutional and environmental factors further compounded these difficulties. The unavailability of digital tools forced teachers to depend on conventional media, reducing the interactivity and appeal of vocabulary lessons. Limited instructional time, caused by English being treated as supplementary local content rather than a core subject, restricted the frequency and depth of vocabulary practice. Meanwhile, the rural school context provided students with negligible authentic exposure to English, reinforcing the classroom's role as virtually the sole site of English language experience. Gede Wira Bayu et al (2025) underscored this concern, noting that many elementary students struggle with vocabulary comprehension when instruction relies on inappropriate models and lacks supporting media, and advocated for vocabulary-building approaches tailored to the developmental characteristics of young learners.

Similar findings were reported by Nisa et al (2025) who found that vocabulary teaching in rural elementary schools is influenced by interconnected challenges including limited facilities, inadequate teacher preparation, and diverse student learning needs. These findings further support the present study, which demonstrates that effective vocabulary instruction requires not only pedagogical improvement but also institutional support and adequate learning resources.

Taken together, these findings suggest that improving English vocabulary learning in rural elementary schools requires a multi-layered response addressing instructional methods, teacher professional development, school resource provision, and community-level English exposure simultaneously.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the challenges faced by teachers in teaching English vocabulary at two rural elementary schools in Bojonegoro, namely SDN Ngablak 1 and MI Al-Islam. The findings revealed four interconnected categories of challenges: pedagogical, professional, institutional-contextual, and student-related. Vocabulary instruction remained heavily reliant on memorization, translation, and repetitive drills, a pattern that produced stronger receptive vocabulary recognition than productive, communicative vocabulary use in students. Teachers' non-English educational backgrounds, compounded by limited access to professional development, constrained their pedagogical flexibility and confidence in designing varied, student-centered lessons. At the institutional level, the absence of digital learning tools, the classification of English as supplementary local content with minimal time allocation, and the rural school environment's negligible authentic English exposure collectively reduced the quality and frequency of vocabulary practice available to students.

The interaction of student, teacher, institutional, and environmental factors demonstrates that the challenges identified are systemic rather than isolated, and cannot be resolved through single-level interventions. Addressing these challenges therefore requires coordinated, multi-layered efforts: strengthening in-service professional development programs targeted specifically at non-English-background teachers, allocating adequate resources and instructional time for English in rural schools, and fostering community-level exposure to English beyond the classroom. This study acknowledges certain limitations; the research was conducted at only two schools with two teacher participants, which limits the generalizability of findings to other rural contexts. Future research should investigate the effectiveness of specific instructional interventions—such as game-based or technology-assisted vocabulary learning—in comparable rural settings, or explore vocabulary learning experiences from the students' perspective to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the issue.

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