An Analysis of Vocabulary-Memorization Difficulties Among Grade X Students of SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Marga Tiga in Learning Arabic

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the challenges faced by Grade X students at SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Marga Tiga in memorizing Arabic vocabulary, a fundamental skill that underpins reading comprehension, speaking ability, and overall language acquisition. Although Arabic is included as a general subject within the school curriculum, many students enter vocational high school with limited linguistic background and minimal exposure to the language, leading to persistent learning obstacles. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and reviews of students' assignments. The findings indicate that students struggle to retain new vocabulary due to several interconnected factors: low intrinsic motivation, the abstract nature of the lexical items, limited opportunities for meaningful repetition, and the absence of contextualized practice. Many students rely on rote memorization techniques that fail to support long-term retention, while the learning environment itself offers little reinforcement beyond the classroom. Additional difficulties arise from the distance between Arabic phonology and the students' first language, creating confusion in both pronunciation and recall. The study concludes that memorization challenges are not merely cognitive issues but reflect broader pedagogical and environmental constraints. It is recommended that teachers incorporate multisensory learning strategies, digital flashcards, spaced-repetition systems, and task-based activities to make vocabulary learning more engaging and sustainable. Strengthening these aspects can significantly improve learners' confidence and achievement in Arabic.

Keywords: vocabulary learning, memorization difficulties, Arabic language, vocational students, language acquisition.

A. INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary mastery has long been recognized as one of the strongest predictors of language proficiency, particularly in foreign-language learning contexts where learners have limited exposure to authentic input. Scholars such as Nation (2001) and Schmitt (2008) consistently argue that without an adequate lexical foundation, students cannot develop comprehension, fluency, or communicative competence. In the case of Arabic, the demands are even greater. The language possesses a distinct orthographic system, a deeply rooted morphological pattern known as *al-jidhru wa al-wazn* (root-and-pattern morphology), and a phonological inventory that differs significantly from

Indonesian and other local languages (Ryding, 2014). These linguistic features require deliberate, consistent, and meaningful vocabulary practice for learners to achieve even basic levels of mastery.

In vocational schools, however, the reality of classroom learning does not always align with these theoretical expectations. Students at the vocational level often prioritize subjects connected to technical skills or industry-specific competencies, leaving language subjects—especially foreign languages—at the margins of their academic focus (Widodo & Rose, 2020). Arabic, which is perceived by many students as distant from their vocational trajectory, becomes a subject approached with minimal intrinsic motivation. As Gardner (2010) notes, motivational orientation plays a pivotal role in determining how effectively learners internalize new vocabulary; low motivation tends to correlate with shallow processing, weak retention, and rapid forgetting.

Preliminary observations at SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Marga Tiga reveal a similar pattern. Students frequently report that Arabic vocabulary feels "too foreign," "hard to memorize," or "easy to forget." These perceptions are not isolated sentiments but reflect broader cognitive and instructional challenges. Research in cognitive psychology suggests that memorizing unfamiliar lexical items requires spaced repetition, multisensory engagement, and contextual anchoring (Baddeley, 2015; Hulstijn, 2013). Yet, many classrooms still depend on traditional vocabulary lists, translation drills, and single-session memorization tasks—methods shown to produce short-term recall but poor long-term retention (Schmitt, 2010; Webb & Nation, 2017).

Arabic vocabulary adds another layer of complexity through its morphological richness. For learners unfamiliar with trilateral root patterns, the morphological variations of a single root can be overwhelming. Al-Batal (2018) explains that learners often struggle to connect derived words to their roots, making vocabulary learning appear fragmented and disconnected. Moreover, phonological features such as emphatic consonants and guttural sounds (e.g., غ، ع، ظ، ط، ض، ص) frequently cause confusion and hinder accurate recall (Younes, 2013). These linguistic barriers, when combined with the educational context of a vocational institution, create a learning environment where vocabulary memorization becomes a persistent challenge.

Environmental and pedagogical factors further complicate the situation. Students seldom encounter Arabic outside the classroom, diminishing the frequency of meaningful exposure—a crucial variable in long-term vocabulary acquisition (Krashen, 1989). In addition, many students employ passive memorization strategies that rely solely on repetition without association, imagery, or personal relevance. Oxford (2011) emphasizes that strategic learners typically engage with vocabulary through multiple pathways—categorizing, visualizing, applying, and rehearsing—whereas less strategic learners tend to depend on rote memorization, which is vulnerable to rapid decay.

Given these intertwined factors—linguistic, cognitive, motivational, and pedagogical—there is a pressing need to analyze how vocabulary memorization difficulties manifest among students at SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Marga Tiga. Understanding the specific barriers they encounter can offer valuable insights into designing more effective instructional strategies tailored to the needs of vocational learners. This study, therefore, aims to explore the forms, causes, and implications of vocabulary-memorization difficulties experienced by Grade X students, situating the analysis within a broader theoretical and empirical framework of second-language acquisition.

B. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design, a framework commonly used to capture natural classroom phenomena and provide detailed accounts of students' learning experiences without manipulating the instructional environment. As Sandelowski (2000) notes, qualitative description is appropriate when the primary goal is to offer a rich yet straightforward representation of participants' perspectives, making it well suited for examining vocabulary-memorization difficulties in an authentic school setting.

Research Setting and Participants

The research took place at SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Marga Tiga, a vocational high school where Arabic is taught as a general subject. The participants consisted of 30 Grade X students enrolled in the Arabic course and one Arabic teacher responsible for classroom instruction. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a technique used to ensure that those involved possess direct experience with the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The students represented diverse vocational majors, which provided variation in motivation, language background, and exposure to Arabic.

Data Collection Techniques

To obtain comprehensive and credible findings, three complementary data-collection methods were employed:

a. Classroom Observation

Observations were conducted during regular instructional sessions to document how vocabulary was introduced, practiced, and assessed. The researcher took field notes on student behaviors, engagement levels, memorization strategies, and difficulties displayed during learning activities. Observation is essential for capturing classroom realities that interviews alone may not reveal (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

b. Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews were conducted with both the teacher and a selected group of students. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to explain their struggles, perceptions, and study habits in their own words while giving the researcher flexibility to probe deeper into emerging themes. This technique is widely recommended for exploring learners' internal processes and affective responses (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

c. Document Analysis

Students' vocabulary notebooks, worksheets, quizzes, and short written tasks were examined to

identify patterns in errors, retention difficulties, and the extent of vocabulary mastery. Document analysis served as a triangulation point to validate findings from observations and interviews (Bowen, 2009).

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The process involved:

1. Familiarization – reading and re-reading field notes, interview transcripts, and documents.

2. Coding – labeling meaningful units of data related to vocabulary difficulties.

3. Categorizing – grouping similar codes into broader thematic categories such as "phonological confusion," "ineffective memorization strategies," and "low motivational engagement."

4. Theme development – synthesizing categories into overarching themes that reflect the central challenges faced by learners.

5. Interpretation – connecting themes with relevant theories and prior research to provide deeper insight.

This approach ensured systematic analysis while allowing flexibility to capture unexpected patterns emerging from the data.

Trustworthiness of the Data

To ensure the credibility and reliability of the findings, several trustworthiness strategies were applied:

a. Triangulation across observations, interviews, and documents (Patton, 2015).
b. Member checking, where selected participants reviewed the interpretations to confirm accuracy (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
c. Peer debriefing with another language-education researcher to maintain analytical rigor.
d. Audit trail, documenting each stage of the research process to maintain transparency.

Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and verbal consent was obtained from students and the teacher. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research. No classroom activities were disrupted, and the study adhered to standard ethical protocols in educational research (BERA, 2018).

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of classroom observations, interview transcripts, and student documents revealed several interconnected themes describing the nature of vocabulary-memorization difficulties experienced by Grade X students at SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Marga Tiga. These difficulties arose from linguistic, cognitive, motivational, and pedagogical factors, reflecting the complex conditions under which Arabic vocabulary is learned in a vocational-school environment.

1. Short-Term Retention Without Long-Term Memory Formation

One of the most prominent patterns was students' ability to recall newly taught vocabulary during the same lesson but forgetting it within one or two days. During interviews, several students admitted that they "memorized only for today" or "forgot the words after going home." This pattern aligns with cognitive-psychology findings that single-session memorization cannot support durable retention (Baddeley, 2015).

Observations showed that vocabulary was frequently introduced in list form, followed by brief oral repetition. Such practices encourage surface processing, which Schmitt (2010) describes as insufficient for long-term storage. Without spaced repetition, retrieval opportunities, or meaningful encounters, lexical items fail to consolidate in memory (Webb & Nation, 2017).

2. Heavy Reliance on Rote Memorization Strategies

Interviews confirmed that most students used rote memorization (hafalan) as their primary strategy. They repeated words mechanically without establishing semantic connections, visual associations, or contextual links. This finding mirrors Laufer's (2017) argument that rote learning produces higher forgetting rates because learners do not integrate new vocabulary into meaningful cognitive frameworks.

Document analysis showed that students' notes consisted mostly of vocabulary lists with Indonesian translations, lacking examples or usage contexts. Such one-dimensional input limits deeper lexical processing, making vocabulary harder to retain.

3. Phonological and Orthographic Confusion

Many students struggled with Arabic phonemes absent in Indonesian, including ض ,ع ,غ ,خ, and ط. Mispronunciation often led to misidentification of lexical items. Interviews revealed consistent comments such as "hurufnya mirip semua" (the letters look similar) and "lupa bunyinya." These linguistic challenges support Younes' (2013) observation that phonological unfamiliarity undermines vocabulary acquisition by weakening learners' perceptual anchors.

Moreover, students frequently confused letters with similar shapes (ث ت ب or خ ح ج), causing difficulty in recalling spellings and meanings. This orthographic uncertainty is typical among beginning learners of Arabic and contributes to slower vocabulary development (Ryding, 2014).

4. Low Perceived Relevance and Motivation

The vocational context significantly influenced students' attitudes. Many expressed that Arabic felt unrelated to their technical majors, echoing findings by Widodo and Rose (2020) that vocational learners tend to prioritize subjects directly connected to employability. As Gardner (2010) explains, low motivation leads to limited engagement, reduced persistence, and weaker memory retention.

During observations, students showed minimal volunteer participation during vocabulary drills unless prompted directly by the teacher. Interviews indicated that lack of confidence and fear of mispronunciation reinforced avoidance behaviors, further limiting practice opportunities.

5. Limited Exposure Beyond the Classroom

Vocabulary learning requires repeated encounters across varied contexts; otherwise, lexical traces fade rapidly (Nation, 2001). However, students reported almost no use of Arabic outside school hours. Unlike English—which students often encounter through music, social media, or digital games, Arabic exposure was restricted solely to class time.

This restricted input environment contradicts Krashen's (1989) hypothesis that meaningful, repeated input is essential for acquisition. Without external reinforcement, classroom input alone becomes insufficient for long-term vocabulary retention.

6. Pedagogical Constraints and Lack of Multisensory Support

Analysis of classroom practice showed that vocabulary instruction relied heavily on oral repetition and translation-based explanation. While these methods offer quick clarity, they do not cater to diverse learning preferences or memory pathways. Oxford (2011) argues that effective vocabulary learning requires multimodal support—visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and semantic associations.

The classroom lacked multimedia tools such as digital flashcards, images, interactive quizzes, or spaced-repetition applications. Students expressed that more visual and technological resources would make learning "easier to remember" and "more fun."

Discussion Summary

The findings illustrate that students' vocabulary-memorization difficulties are not merely a matter of "forgetfulness" but are rooted in deeper linguistic, psychological, and instructional factors. The interaction of unfamiliar phonology, ineffective strategies, limited motivation, and insufficient exposure forms a cycle that continually undermines retention.

This pattern supports a wide body of research indicating that vocabulary acquisition requires repeated exposure, meaningful engagement, and multisensory reinforcement (Schmitt, 2008; Nation, 2001;

Webb & Nation, 2017). In the context of vocational schools, these needs become even more pronounced due to students' academic orientation and learning preferences.

D. CONCLUSION

This study examined the vocabulary-memorization difficulties experienced by Grade X students at SMK Muhammadiyah 1 Marga Tiga and revealed that the challenges they face are multifaceted rather than the result of a single instructional or cognitive weakness. The difficulties arise from the interplay of linguistic complexity, limited exposure, low motivation, and reliance on ineffective memorization strategies. Students were able to recall newly introduced vocabulary only for a short period, indicating that their learning practices supported short-term memory but failed to promote long-term retention. The strong dependence on rote repetition, combined with minimal contextualization and the absence of multisensory reinforcement, further weakened their ability to internalize and retain lexical items.

Linguistic factors such as phonological unfamiliarity, orthographic similarity among Arabic letters, and the morphological structure of the language also contributed significantly to students' struggles. These challenges were intensified by low motivation, particularly because many vocational students perceived Arabic as unrelated to their future careers. With limited exposure outside the classroom, opportunities for meaningful repetition and retrieval practice were scarce, making vocabulary learning a fragile and easily disrupted process.

The findings underscore the need for more innovative and supportive instructional approaches. Teachers should integrate strategies that promote deeper cognitive engagement, such as spaced repetition, semantic mapping, visual aids, contextualized tasks, and technology-assisted vocabulary tools. Creating opportunities for authentic or semi-authentic exposure—through multimedia resources, simple communicative activities, or digital platforms, can help reinforce vocabulary beyond classroom boundaries. Addressing motivational factors is equally essential; connecting vocabulary with real-life relevance, learner interests, or project-based learning may enhance students' willingness to engage and persist.

In essence, vocabulary difficulty in this context should not be viewed merely as a failure on the part of the learner. Rather, it reflects a broader learning ecosystem that requires alignment between students' needs, linguistic realities, and pedagogical practices. Strengthening these elements can contribute to more sustainable vocabulary acquisition and improve learners' confidence and achievement in Arabic language learning..

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.
Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; In-vestigation.

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