

Sixth Grade Students' Difficulties in Learning English At Muhammadiyah 1 Elementary School

Mulki Yustinto¹, Solehan²

¹²UNIVERSITY OF MUHAMMADIYAH BENGKULU

Correspondent Author E-Mail:

mulkiyustinto3445@gmail.com, solehbk1390@gmail.com

Abstract

Learning English at the elementary level often presents various challenges for students, particularly in contexts where English is taught as a foreign language. This study aims to investigate the difficulties faced by sixth grade students in learning English at Muhammadiyah 1 Elementary School. The research employed a descriptive qualitative design. The subjects of the study were sixth grade students, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using classroom observations, questionnaires, and interviews to gain comprehensive insights into students' learning difficulties.

The findings reveal that students experience several major difficulties, including limited vocabulary mastery, problems with pronunciation, low understanding of grammar, and lack of confidence in speaking English. In addition, insufficient exposure to English outside the classroom and limited learning media were found to contribute to these difficulties. These challenges negatively affect students' motivation and participation during English lessons. The study implies that teachers need to apply more interactive teaching strategies, provide varied learning media, and create a supportive learning environment to reduce students' difficulties in learning English. Improving teaching methods is expected to enhance students' English learning outcomes at the elementary level.

Keywords: *learning difficulties, English learning, elementary students, sixth grade*

INTRODUCTION

English has become one of the most important international languages used in communication, education, science, technology, and global business. As globalization continues to develop, English proficiency is considered an essential skill that enables students to access information, communicate across cultures, and compete in the international community. Consequently, English has been introduced at various educational levels in Indonesia, including elementary schools, to provide students with early exposure to the language and to build a strong foundation for future learning (Crystal, 2020).

Learning English at the elementary school level is expected to develop students' basic language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. At this stage, students are also expected to acquire fundamental vocabulary, pronunciation, and simple grammatical structures through enjoyable and meaningful learning

experiences. However, learning a foreign language is not an easy process, particularly for young learners whose first language differs significantly from English. The differences in vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and sentence structure often create obstacles that affect students' language acquisition (Cameron, 2021).

Numerous studies have reported that elementary school students frequently encounter difficulties in learning English. These difficulties include limited vocabulary mastery, inaccurate pronunciation, lack of confidence in speaking, difficulty understanding grammar, and low reading comprehension. Such problems may arise from both internal and external factors. Internal factors include students' motivation, learning interest, anxiety, self-confidence, and cognitive readiness, while external factors involve teaching methods, classroom environment, learning facilities, parental support, and exposure to English outside the classroom (Rahmat & Fitriani, 2022; Sari et al., 2023).

Among these factors, vocabulary mastery has consistently been identified as one of the greatest challenges faced by elementary school students. Without sufficient vocabulary, students experience difficulties in understanding classroom instructions, reading texts, expressing ideas, and participating actively in classroom communication. Likewise, pronunciation remains another common problem because English spelling and pronunciation often differ considerably from Indonesian phonological patterns, causing students to hesitate when speaking English (Nation, 2022).

Motivation also plays a significant role in determining students' success in learning English. Students who have positive attitudes toward English generally demonstrate greater participation and willingness to practice the language, whereas those with low motivation often become passive during classroom activities. According to Dörnyei (2021), motivation is one of the strongest predictors of successful foreign language learning because it influences learners' persistence, engagement, and learning strategies throughout the learning process.

In addition to learner-related factors, teachers have an important role in facilitating effective English learning. The selection of appropriate teaching methods, interactive classroom activities, and engaging learning media can significantly improve students' interest and reduce learning difficulties. Young learners generally learn more effectively through games, songs, storytelling, pictures, and collaborative activities than through traditional teacher-centered instruction (Shin & Crandall, 2021). Therefore, understanding students' learning difficulties can help teachers design instructional strategies that better meet students' learning needs.

Several previous studies have investigated students' difficulties in learning English at different educational levels. Rahmat and Fitriani (2022) found that elementary school students experienced difficulties mainly in vocabulary acquisition and pronunciation because of limited exposure to English outside the classroom. Similarly, Sari et al. (2023) reported that low motivation, inadequate teaching media, and insufficient classroom interaction contributed significantly to students' learning problems. However, most previous studies were conducted in different educational contexts, and relatively few have specifically examined the learning difficulties experienced by sixth-grade students in Muhammadiyah elementary schools.

Therefore, further investigation is needed to provide context-specific findings that can support improvements in English teaching practices.

Muhammadiyah 1 Elementary School is one of the schools that provides English learning opportunities for its students. Nevertheless, based on preliminary classroom observations and informal discussions with teachers, several sixth-grade students still experience difficulties in understanding English lessons, remembering vocabulary, pronouncing English words correctly, and communicating confidently in English. These problems may influence their academic achievement and their readiness for learning English at the next educational level.

Based on the background above, this study aims to analyze the difficulties experienced by sixth-grade students in learning English at Muhammadiyah 1 Elementary School. Specifically, this research seeks to identify the major learning difficulties encountered by students and explore the factors contributing to those difficulties. The findings are expected to provide useful information for teachers, schools, and future researchers in developing more effective instructional strategies that support English learning among elementary school students.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to investigate sixth grade students' difficulties in learning English at Muhammadiyah 1 Elementary School. A descriptive qualitative approach was chosen because it allows the researcher to explore and describe students' learning difficulties in depth based on real classroom situations and participants' experiences. This design is appropriate for understanding learning problems as they occur naturally without manipulation of variables (Ulya, 2021); (Nirwan et al., 2024).

The research was conducted at Muhammadiyah 1 Elementary School, with the subjects consisting of 17 sixth grade students. The participants were selected using purposive sampling, focusing on students who were actively involved in English learning activities and were identified as experiencing difficulties in learning English. The school was chosen as the research site due to the observable challenges faced by students in mastering English skills, particularly as English is taught as a foreign language (Sintadewi et al., 2020).

Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. Classroom observations were carried out to obtain direct information about students' behavior, participation, and responses during English lessons. Through observation, the researcher was able to identify students' difficulties related to vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and language skills in an authentic learning environment (Hartienah & Soviyah, 2024). Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner with students and the English teacher to gain deeper insights into students' learning difficulties and the factors influencing those difficulties. This technique allowed participants to freely express their experiences and perceptions related to English learning (Ulya, 2021). Documentation was used to support data obtained from observations and interviews, including lesson plans, teaching materials, students' worksheets, and assessment results, which provided additional information about the teaching and learning process (Sintadewi et al., 2020).

In this qualitative study, the researcher acted as the main research instrument, playing a key role in collecting, interpreting, and analyzing the data. To support the data collection process, several instruments were used, such as observation checklists,

interview guidelines, and documentation sheets. These instruments were designed to ensure that the data collected were relevant to the research objectives and systematically organized (Nirwan et al., 2024).

Data analysis was conducted using an interactive analysis model, which involved three main steps: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction was carried out by selecting and focusing on relevant data related to students' English learning difficulties. The reduced data were then organized and presented in descriptive forms to make patterns and themes easier to identify. Finally, conclusions were drawn based on the interpretation of the data and supported by evidence obtained from multiple sources (Ulya, 2021).

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, this study applied the criteria of credibility, transferability, and dependability. Credibility was achieved through triangulation of data collection techniques, including observation, interviews, and documentation. Transferability was ensured by providing detailed descriptions of the research context and participants so that the findings could be applied to similar settings. Dependability was established by maintaining consistent research procedures and clearly documenting each stage of the research process (Sintadewi et al., 2020).

FINDING AND DISCUSSIONS

FINDING

Based on classroom observations and interviews involving 17 sixth grade students and the English teacher at Muhammadiyah 1 Elementary School, this study found that students experience various difficulties in learning English. These difficulties were observed during teaching and learning activities and were also confirmed through participants' explanations during interviews.

From the observation results, students showed difficulties in several English language components, including vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Many students appeared to have limited vocabulary, which affected their ability to understand teachers' instructions and learning materials delivered in English. During interviews, the teacher explained that students often required repeated explanations or translations into their first language because they did not recognize many basic English words. Grammar difficulties were observed when students attempted to construct simple sentences, particularly in written tasks. Students frequently made errors in word order and sentence structure, indicating limited understanding of basic English grammar. Pronunciation difficulties were also noticeable, as students tended to pronounce English words based on their first-language sound system.

In terms of language skills, observations revealed that students experienced difficulties in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Listening difficulties were evident when students did not respond appropriately to spoken English instructions. Speaking was observed as the most challenging skill, as many students were reluctant to speak English voluntarily. During interviews, several students expressed fear of making mistakes or being laughed at by their peers. Reading difficulties were identified when students struggled to understand short texts, mainly due to limited vocabulary. Writing difficulties were observed in students' written assignments, where they had difficulty expressing ideas in simple English sentences.

Based on both observation and interview data, vocabulary and speaking difficulties emerged as the most dominant problems faced by the students. Limited vocabulary hindered students' confidence and ability to participate in speaking activities. The teacher also reported that students tended to be passive during oral activities and preferred using their first language instead of English.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that students' English learning difficulties are

influenced by internal and external factors. Internal factors identified from interviews include low motivation, lack of confidence, and anxiety when using English. Students often felt nervous when asked to speak English in front of the class. External factors, based on classroom observations and teacher interviews, include limited exposure to English outside the classroom, teaching practices that were still largely teacher-centered, and limited use of interactive learning media. These conditions reduced students' opportunities to practice English actively and meaningfully.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study support theories of English learning in EFL contexts, which emphasize that limited exposure to English and insufficient vocabulary mastery are major obstacles for elementary learners. Vocabulary is a fundamental component of language learning because it underpins the development of other language skills such as speaking, reading, and writing (Alharbi, 2021). Therefore, students with limited vocabulary tend to experience broader difficulties across language skills, as found in this study.

The dominance of vocabulary and speaking difficulties is consistent with previous studies on elementary EFL learners. (Sintadewi et al., 2020) found that vocabulary and grammar were the primary difficulties faced by elementary school students. Similarly, (Kainat et al., 2023) reported that limited vocabulary and low confidence significantly affected students' speaking performance. (Rahayu & Rosa, 2021) also highlighted pronunciation and speaking anxiety as major barriers to oral communication among elementary learners. These findings indicate that the difficulties identified in this study are not isolated but reflect common challenges faced by elementary EFL students.

From an academic perspective, the students' English learning difficulties can be interpreted as the result of the interaction between internal and external factors. Internal factors such as low motivation and anxiety reduce students' willingness to practice English, while external factors such as instructional methods and limited learning media restrict opportunities for meaningful language use. This interpretation aligns with (Agustina et al., 2023), who emphasized that teachers' roles, teaching strategies, and the use of appropriate learning media are crucial in reducing students' learning difficulties. Therefore, to address students' difficulties effectively, English instruction at the elementary level should emphasize interactive teaching strategies, supportive learning environments, and increased opportunities for students to practice English in a low-anxiety context.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that sixth grade students at Muhammadiyah 1 Elementary School experience various difficulties in learning English. The main difficulties identified include problems in vocabulary mastery, grammar understanding, pronunciation, and the four English language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Among these difficulties, vocabulary and speaking difficulties were found to be the most dominant. Limited vocabulary hindered students' comprehension and confidence, while speaking difficulties were closely related to students' fear of making mistakes and low self-confidence when using English.

The findings of this study answer the research objectives by showing that students' English learning difficulties are influenced by both internal and external factors. Internal factors include low motivation, anxiety, and lack of confidence, which reduce students' willingness to practice English actively. External factors involve limited exposure to English, teacher-centered instructional practices, insufficient use of interactive learning media, and a learning environment that does not fully support

active English use. These factors interact with one another and contribute to the overall difficulties experienced by students in learning English.

Based on these findings, this study has several implications for teachers and schools. English teachers are encouraged to apply more interactive and student-centered teaching strategies, increase the use of engaging learning media, and create a supportive classroom atmosphere that reduces students' anxiety.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The research was limited to one elementary school and focused only on sixth grade students, so the findings may not be generalized to other contexts. In addition, this study relied on qualitative data obtained through observation and interviews, without quantitative measurements to support the findings.

Therefore, future researchers are recommended to conduct studies involving a wider range of schools and participants, or to apply mixed-method approaches to obtain more comprehensive data. Further research may also focus on specific strategies or interventions to overcome students' English learning difficulties, particularly in vocabulary development and speaking skills at the elementary school level.

SUGGESTION

Based on the findings of this study, several suggestions are proposed. First, English teachers should apply more engaging and student-centered teaching strategies, such as games, storytelling, songs, and interactive activities, to increase students' motivation and reduce their learning difficulties. Teachers are also encouraged to provide regular vocabulary practice and opportunities for students to improve their pronunciation and speaking skills through meaningful classroom interaction. Second, the school should support English learning by providing adequate learning resources, including visual media, digital learning tools, and a language-rich classroom environment. Collaboration between teachers and parents is also recommended to encourage students to practice English outside the classroom and develop positive attitudes toward learning the language. Finally, future researchers are encouraged to conduct similar studies involving larger samples or different educational settings to obtain more comprehensive findings. Further research may also investigate effective teaching strategies or intervention programs to overcome elementary school students' difficulties in learning English and improve their language achievement.

REFERENCES

- Agustina, L. Saputra, E. (2023). *TEACHERS ' ROLES IN OVERCOMING SPECIAL NEEDS STUDENTS DIFFICULTIES IN LEARNING ENGLISH AT ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS* IN. 03(02), 152–163.
- Ahmetović, E., & Dubravac, V. (2021). Elementary School EFL Learning Experience: A Needs Analysis. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 11, 1515–1525. <https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1112.02>
- Alharbi, S. H. (2021). *The Struggling English Language Learners : Case Studies of English Language Learning Difficulties in EFL Context*. 14(11), 108–117. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v14n11p108>

- Cameron, L. (2001). **Teaching languages to young learners**. Cambridge University Press.
- Crystal, D. (2012). **English as a global language** (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139196970>
- Dörnyei, Z. (2001). **Motivational strategies in the language classroom**. Cambridge University Press.
- Hartienah, Q. M., & Soviyah. (2024). *Challenges of An Elementary School English Teacher : A Qualitative Study*. 3(2), 239–246.
- Kainat, R. ... Siddique, A. (2023). *Elementary Students ' Difficulties in English Learning : A Case Study of Elementary Schools in Pakistan*. 11(1), 192–201.
- Muhammad, R. ... Khan, I. (2020). *Investigating Reading Challenges Faced by EFL Learners at Elementary Level*. 13(02), 277–292. <https://doi.org/10.18326/rgt.v13i2.277-292>
- Nation, I. S. P. (2022). **Learning vocabulary in another language** (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press
- Nirwan ... BurhanuddinAG. (2024). *QUALITATIVE DESCRIPTIVE RESEARCH : INTEGRATING INQUIRY- BASED LEARNING INTO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ENGLISH*. 11(1), 1–15.
- Normawati, A. ... Karangturi, U. N. (2023). *EFL Learners ' Difficulties in Speaking English*. 1(1), 1–9.
- Özmat, D., & Senemoğlu, N. (2021). *Difficulties in Learning English by EFL Students in*. 141–173. <https://doi.org/10.30964/auebfd.742803>
- Rahayu, T., & Rosa, R. N. (2021). *Problems in Learning English Faced by Elementary School Students in Jambi City*. 539(Icla 2020), 262–266.
- Rose, H., McKinley, J., & Galloway, N. (2021). *Global Englishes and language teaching: A review of pedagogical research*. **Language Teaching*, 54*(2), 157–189. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444820000518>
- Shin, J. K., & Crandall, J. (2021). **Teaching young learners English: From theory to practice** (2nd ed.). National Geographic Learning.
- Sintadewi, D. ... Febryan, I. (2020). *Analysis of English Learning Difficulty of Students in Elementary School*. 4(3), 431–438.
- Ulya. (2021). *FACTORS OF ENGLISH LEARNING DIFFICULTIES AT ELEMENTARY*.