Investigating Elementary School Pupils' Proficiency in Mastering English Vocabulary

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Abstract

English has been taught at elementary schools as one of the local content subjects. It is necessary to study English from an early age in order to achieve good mastery in it. To master English means to master the four skills in it and also the language aspects, including vocabulary. As one of the language aspects, vocabulary plays an important role in language learning. This study reports on pupils' proficiency in mastering English vocabulary after three years of studying in elementary school. The writer chose 55 grade-four pupils of SD Methodist Banda Aceh as a sample for this study. They were given a vocabulary test related to reading and writing skills consisting of 26 items. The test was to be done in 20 minutes. After calculating the data, it was found that the mean score ($\bar{x}$) of the pupils was 69.5, with the highest score at 92.3 and the lowest score at 26.9. More than 50% of the pupils could answer the questions correctly in less than 20 minutes. Only 4 out of the 55 pupils answered the questions less than 50% correctly and no one answered 100% correct. According to these results, this study showed that the pupils achieved good proficiency in vocabulary.

Keywords: Teaching English to young learners, vocabulary, reading, and writing.

1. INTRODUCTION

We all know and realize how important English is in our lives nowadays. This language has a significant status in the world's communication since it is a global language and is used to communicate with other nations. Kral (1994) revealed that language is a form of communication among individuals in a specific social context and also a way of thinking and processing information. To master English means to master all skills in it, namely productive skills (speaking and writing) and receptive skills (reading and listening) as well as the language aspects such as vocabulary,

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pronunciation, and grammar. By mastering the language skills and the language aspects, someone will be able to communicate actively in English in both spoken and written forms.

To have a good achievement in mastering English, it is necessary to study it from an early age. The teaching of English to young children has become important in recent years. Setiono (1999), quoting from Asher and García (1969), said that children have the greatest probability of attaining near-native pronunciation when they start studying from six years old or younger. Furthermore, they mentioned that children may make mistakes in learning English but they will be corrected through a trial and error process. They also added that younger children are far more successful at memorizing vocabulary and pronouncing new words in a foreign language.

Vocabulary, as one of the language aspects, plays an important role because it is needed to build up other language skills. It is a fundamental aspect of language acquisition. The more words someone knows, the more ideas he or she can verbalize. On the contrary, the less vocabulary someone has, the lower his or her ability to understand and express ideas. Furthermore, Sawardi, et al. (1991) stated that words are the medium of communication, even of communication to oneself. We think with words as we write them, and neither thinking nor writing can be efficient unless the words are accurate.

Nowadays, English has been introduced at elementary schools in Indonesia as one of the local content subjects. This means that it is not an obligatory subject at elementary school. It has been taught at some elementary schools in Banda Aceh; including SD (*Sekolah Dasar* or elementary school) Methodist Banda Aceh where English has been introduced to the pupils since they were in grade one. Therefore, the writer may assume that the pupils of SD Methodist are acquainted with English because they have started studying English at an early age.

Based on the above discussions, the writer wanted to find out the proficiency level of the pupils in SD Methodist in learning English, especially their achievement in vocabulary, after three years of studying by giving them a vocabulary test.

2.   REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1   Teaching English to Young Children

Teaching English to young children has become important in recent years. Setiono (1999) said that English language learning must be started from an early age because language learning plays an important role in language acquisition, at least in phonological acquisition. He also added that children have the greatest probability of attaining near-native pronunciation when they are six years old or younger.

There are three aspects that should be considered in teaching English to young children namely the teacher, the length of the lessons, and the activities used in the classroom. One of the successful keys in learning depends on the teacher. It is believed that teaching English to young children will give a good effect if the teacher knows the appropriate methods and techniques to teach young children and to motivate them in order to have a positive attitude towards English. According to Kral (1994), the teacher is the person specially trained to guide and help the student, select appropriate learning

materials, and create a positive classroom environment. Thus, the teacher plays an important role in the teaching learning process.

In addition, Setiono (1999) stated that the fact that children feel bored and discouraged in learning English may stem from those three factors mentioned above (e.g. the teacher, the length of time of the lesson, and the classroom activities). The first factor is that an English teacher may lack knowledge of pedagogy for the subject for teaching children and, thus, be inadequately prepared to teach the subject matter. In addition, in conducting English classes, an English teacher tends to put emphasis on memorizing. It is common that our education system for various disciplines is heavily reliant on book learning and students are expected to memorize the materials provided in their books. Moreover, many English teachers still adopt an authoritarian form of education. The atmosphere in the class is teacher centred. Students are rarely given opportunities to interact with their peers or their teachers. Situations like this must be avoided in teaching English to young children.

The second factor is the length of each lesson. The length of time that the English teacher needs to teach young children is different from those who are adults. Halliwell (1992) revealed that the appropriate length of time for children in learning English is about 45 minutes a day. This is also supported by Holden (1980) who stated that children cannot concentrate on one thing for a long period because children are easily overloaded with experiences and information. They usually get bored and lose concentration faster than adults. A child's concentration span increases as he/ she grows older.

The last factor is classroom activities. The activities in the classroom for children learning English are different from those for adults. So, the teacher should plan and design suitable activities for the children in the class. Commonly, young children like to study by playing. Scott and Ytreberg (1990) divided the young language learner into two main groups: the five to seven years old and the eight to ten years old. According to them, some criteria of the five to seven years old are that the children love to play and learn best when they are enjoying themselves; they know that the word is governed by rules and they may not always understand the rules, but they know that they have to obey the rules; they have a very short attention and concentration span; and they cannot decide for themselves on what to learn. While, the characteristics of the eight to ten years old are that they can ask question all the time; they are able to make some decisions about their own learning; they can decide about what they like and do not like doing; and they are able to work with others and learn from others.

Based on the above criteria, the teacher, therefore, should be able to create the activities that are appropriate for the children such as playing games, telling stories, and singing songs. Furthermore, Brumfit (1991, p. vii) agreed that learning language at the earlier age gives some advantages because the brain is more adaptable before puberty than after, and that acquisition of languages is possible without self-consciousness at an early age.

Children have fewer negative attitudes to foreign languages and cultures than adults and, consequently, they are better motivated than adults. Their language learning is more closely integrated with real communication because it depends more on the immediate physical environment than adult language. They devote vast quantities of time to language learning, compared with adults, and they are better because they do more of it.

2.2   Children's Language Acquisition

Children's first words bring joy and amazement to their parents. Learning to talk seems so natural and children learn so quickly and very soon they can express an entire idea. Gleason (1961) stated that the child's acquisition of his native language is not dependent on any special tutoring. In this case, the children who become fluent speakers do not depend on their parents only but they can also pick up a language by playing with other children or by people around them. In addition, Fisher and Terry (1977) said that language acquisition results from a complex combination of biological and environmental factors. In other words, environment is an important factor that bears children to acquire the language.

Furthermore, Gleason (1961) believed that a child cannot invent a language from scratch. This means that language cannot be acquired without interaction among people. Language cannot develop. In children who grew up in the wilderness in isolation or in isolation from language use, for instance if raised by a deaf-mute or shut off from the world except for feeding, In relation to language acquisition, Brumfit (1991) believed that all learners learn a language very broadly along the same route or order, whether as their first or second language. The first process in acquiring a language is by recognizing the objects both concrete and abstract then followed by learning the vocabulary.

Vocabulary growth is based on the experiences of the learner. They must be associated with meaning in order to be useful for communication. Quandt (1977), as he quoted from Petty, Herold and Stoll (1968), explained how vocabulary is acquired. The child first has an experience. As a result, he or she learns a word or some words to associate with the experience. As new perceptions of the experience are gained, and as new experiences occur, each new perception is added to earlier perceptions. As a child assimilates these new perceptions, he or she must accommodate them with an understanding of previous experiences. This composite is then associated with words whose meaning are already known as well as with new words that are spoken or written by another person. Probably the child learns most vocabulary by making his or her own association between words and the actions of the persons observed using them. Thus, the experience is a necessary prerequisite to vocabulary growth.

2.3   The Children's Approaches in Learning Vocabulary

Vocabulary plays an important role in language learning. Pahuja (1994) revealed the reasons why it is important to have a good vocabulary since mastering vocabulary may help us to understand the exact meaning of what we say, write, hear, and read; to avoid any misunderstanding in our minds and the reader's mind; to speak and write easily and fluently; to make the speech and writing more interesting and to avoid using confusing words or using words incorrectly.

The word vocabulary has several meanings. Wehmeier and Hornby (2000) have three meanings for the word vocabulary, firstly vocabulary as the total number of words in a language, then as the total number of words used by a person, and finally as a list of the words used in a book or piece of writing. More usually the definition of vocabulary is the total number of words which make up a language (Wehmeier & Hornby, 2000). Consequently, it is clear that vocabulary is the number of words which are very important for one to communicate or represent idea.

Most children have the same approach to learning vocabulary. According to Quandt (1977), there are four types of vocabulary available to a child, they are listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Listening vocabulary normally develops early as the child begins to associate what is heard with existing experiences. It continues to expand, but as the child begins to talk, the second type that is speaking vocabulary is also built. Later, the third and the fourth types of vocabulary, reading and writing, develop simultaneously.

Furthermore, Petty, et al. (1968) divided reading vocabulary into two types: sight vocabulary and meaning vocabulary. Sight vocabulary consists of the words that a reader recognizes because they have become a part of his or her visual memory. When a child sees such words, their pronunciation and basic meaning are rapidly recognized. The other type, that is meaning vocabulary, consists of the words with which an individual can associate meaning when they appear in context.

Moreover, Rafiqa (2002), quoting from Kaluger and Kolson (1978), stated that generally there are four kinds of vocabulary acquired by young children, namely understanding vocabulary, speaking vocabulary, reading vocabulary, and writing vocabulary. The understanding vocabulary is the first vocabulary developed by young children since they are able to respond and recognize the words spoken to them by their family before they can talk, read, or write. They are able to do it because they hear the words repeatedly and soon they know the meaning of the words. Fisher and Terry (1977) revealed that every word is essentially a symbol. By understanding the symbol associated with a word, people understand the meaning of the word. For example, the word *water* is meaningful to us because we understand the symbol of water. We have had experiences with water. We swim in water, we drink water, and we do dishes with water. It is an example of concrete symbols and the words associated with them are easier to learn than abstract and intangible ones. For instance, if we want children to understand the symbol of *square* and the word associated with it, we need to show them pictures of squares, have them cut out squares, and perhaps ask them to draw squares. However, the words associated with intangible and emotive symbols such as the word *honest* can be learned by young children through experiences, either direct experience, vicarious experience, or a combination of both. When children have had plenty of experiences related to the symbols of honesty, they will understand the symbol and the word *honest*.

After recognizing the symbol of words, children will have speaking vocabulary. Speaking vocabulary grows rapidly and it is hard to determine the rate of growth of this vocabulary even after the children come to school. The next vocabulary acquired by the children is reading vocabulary. Most of them acquire it when they enter the school in the first grade. Here they learn to apply a new type of symbol, a printed word, and the concept of the word that they have previously acquired. Finally, the children begin to learn the writing vocabulary. The process of acquiring the writing vocabulary occurs when they enter the school where they learn how to produce the printed symbol from the reading vocabulary in written form.

Since vocabulary is an influential factor in learning a language, the teacher should plan and design the materials for students in which they can be motivated to learn. Teaching English to young children is different from teaching teenagers or adults. The first reason is because children easily get bored and change their mood. Therefore, the teacher must be creative to create and provide a variety of activities for children to avoid their getting bored (Klein, 2005, as cited in Fitriana, 2012). Another reason is that

children have a greater motivation compared to adults to do things that appeal to them. It is known that children are interested in games, songs, and stories. Thus, the teacher should provide them with these activities when they are learning English as stated by Scott and Ytreberg (1990) that children love to play and learn best when they are enjoying themselves.

In addition, it seems that providing a media such as using simple and interesting pictures may attract the young children's attention to learn particularly English vocabulary. Suleiman (2002) believed that a picture is an important visual aid and easy to understand. The pictures should be selected properly based on the lessons, for instance, if teachers want to teach vocabulary about food, they can choose pictures of food. Suleiman (2002, p. 28) stated clearly that to achieve a maximal goal, there are some requirements for selecting a picture. These are as follows:

1. Pictures must be good, clear, interesting, easy to understand and big enough for the student to see necessary details.
2. Pictures should be appropriate for the material or problem that is being studied.
3. Pictures must be correct or authentic, meaning that they describe the situation similar to the real condition.
4. Simplicity is important, difficult pictures commonly make children confused about a small part or detail in the picture and then they cannot find the meaning in it.
5. Pictures must be suitable for the level of intelligence of the person who sees them.
6. Colour, even if not important, can increase the value of a picture making it more realistic and stimulate more interest in it from the person that sees it.
7. Comparative size in the picture is preferable.

It is clear that choosing appropriate pictures with suitable requirements as mentioned above in teaching vocabulary may increase the students' motivation to learn English. A study conducted by Fitriana (2012) shows that the vocabulary test given to the fourth grade of elementary school students with and without pictures give significantly different mean scores. The mean score of vocabulary test using pictures was 89.89, whereas the mean score of the test without using pictures was 65.39. It is likely that pictures have a great influence in students' proficiency in mastering English vocabulary.

3. METHOD

The population of this study was the pupils of SD Methodist in Banda Aceh. A number of 55 grade-four pupils were taken as the sample for this study. They were grouped into two classes. English had been introduced to the students since they were in the first grade. There were three class hours a week for the first and second grade students. The third and fourth grade students had two class hours a week. While, the fifth and sixth grade students had only one class hour a week. Each class hour is equivalent to 45 minutes.

The main objective of this study was to test the pupils in order to know their English proficiency, especially in vocabulary. Gronlund (1993) stated the aim of a test as a systematic procedure for measuring the proficiency of a representative sample in performing a learning task. The instrument used in this research was from Cambridge Young Learners English, University of Cambridge-Local Examinations Syndicate. There were three kinds of test of Cambridge Young Learners English, namely Starters

Reading and Writing, Movers Reading and Writing, and Advance Reading and Writing. The writer took the first one because it was assumed to be suitable for the fourth grade pupils of an elementary school. It consisted of 26 items related to vocabulary and the time limit to do the test was 20 minutes. The test was divided into five parts as follows:

Part 1: There were 5 questions in part 1. The directions were look and read, put a tick (v) or a cross (x) in the box.

Part 2: There were 5 questions in part 2. The directions were look and read, write yes or no.

Part 3: It consisted of 5 questions. The directions were look at the pictures, look at the letters, and write the words.

Part 4: There were 6 questions. The directions were read the story, look at the pictures, and write the words.

Part 5: It consisted of 5 questions. The directions were look at the pictures, read the questions, and write one-word answers.

After the scores from the vocabulary test were collected, the writer used some formulas to measure the English proficiency of the pupils as follows:

First, the writer had to change students' raw scores into scores which have a standard base of 100 by using the following formula presented by Capon (1988, p. 49):

$$x = \frac{fc}{fi} \times 100\%$$

Where:

x = score
fc = total correct answers (raw score)
fi = total items

In order to analyze the data, the writer used a relevant statistical technique, which is mean ($\bar{x}$). The mean score ($\bar{x}$) is used to find the average score of the students. Capon (1988, p. 49) presents the following formula for the mean score ($\bar{x}$):

$$(\bar{x}) = \frac{\sum Fx}{N} \frac{\sum Fx}{N}$$

Where:

$(\bar{x})$ = mean score
$\sum fx$ = total scores of all students
N   = total number of students

Besides the mean score, the writer also used a letter scale to record the proficiency of pupils from SD Methodist in mastering English vocabulary. Arikunto (1987, p. 241) uses a scale table as follows:

Table 1. Letter scale.

Score	Scale	Meaning
80 – 100	A	Very good
66 – 79	B	Good
56 – 65	C	Fair
40 – 55	D	Less
30 – 39	E	Fail

4.   FINDINGS

Table 2 presents the students' scores gathered from the test.

Table 2. The students' scores.

Time (minute)	No. of students		Correct answers	Score
5	15	1	24	92.3
		2	23	88.5
		1	22	84.6
		2	21	80.8
		1	20	76.9
		1	19	73.1
		1	18	69.2
		3	17	65.4
		1	16	61.5
		1	13	50
		1	11	42.3
6	8	2	23	88.5
		1	22	84.6
		1	21	80.8
		1	18	69.2
		1	17	65.4
		2	15	57.7
7	2	1	17	65.4
		1	7	26.9
8	1	1	9	34.6
9	1	1	13	50
12	24	3	23	88.5
		4	22	84.6
		2	21	80.8
		6	20	76.9
		1	19	73.1
		1	18	69.2
		2	16	61.5
		1	15	57.7
		2	14	53.8
		2	13	50
14	1	1	16	61.5
15	1	1	14	53.8
16	1	1	11	42.3
18	1	1	14	53.8
Total of students	55	55		

From Table 2 above, we can see that there were various times for students to finish the vocabulary test, ranging from 5 to 18 minutes. Actually, the time given was 20 minutes. There were 15 students (27.2%) who could do the test in 5 minutes. Interestingly, their scores were varied which were from 92.3 (24 correct answers) as the highest to 42.3 (11 correct answers) as the lowest score. Furthermore, there were 8 students (14.5%) who were able to do the test in 6 minutes, with 88.5 (23 correct answers) as the highest score performed by two students and 57.7 (15 correct answers) as the lowest score. Only two students (3.6%) in seven minutes could finish the test with 65.4 (17 correct answers) as the highest score and 26.9 (7 correct answers) as the lowest. Dominantly, the students could finish the test in 12 minutes. There were 24 out

of 55students or 43.6% who needed 12 minutes to do it. Their scores ranged from 88.5 (23 correct answers) to 50 (13 correct answers). Even, only one student, who got 14 correct answers (score 53.8) needed 18 minutes to do the test.

Table 3 below describes the computation of the pupils' scores and the mean scores in doing the vocabulary test.

Table 3. The computation of the pupils' scores in vocabulary test.

No.	X	F	Fx
1	92.3	1	92.3
2	88.5	7	619.5
3	84.6	6	507.6
4	80.8	5	404
5	76.9	7	538.3
6	73.1	2	146.2
7	69.2	3	207.6
8	65.4	5	327
9	61.5	4	246
10	57.7	3	173.1
11	53.8	4	215.2
12	50	4	200
13	42.3	2	84.6
14	34.6	1	34.6
15	26.9	1	26.9
Total		55	3822.9

From Table 3, we can see that the mode (the score which occurred most often) was 88.5 (23 correct answers) and 76.9 (20 correct answers). Each score was obtained by seven students. Conversely, the highest score (92.3) was obtained by only one student, followed by the lowest score (26.9) which was also obtained by only one student. Specifically, it is clear that there were nine students whose scores ranged between 80 and 100 or scale A (Arikunto, 1987). Their scores were 92.3 (1 student), 88.5 (7 students), 84.6 (6 students), and 80.8 (5 students). However, twelve students who got the score of 76.9 (7 students), 73.1 (2 students) and 69.2 (three students) were in scale B or the score is between 66 and 79. Meanwhile, scale C was achieved by 12 students whose scores were between 56 and 65. There were 10 students who got score the score of 53.8 (4 students), 50 (4 students), and 42.3 (two students) were in scale D. Finally only two students failed the test as their scores were in scale E, which were 34.6 and 26.9.

Based on Table 3, the writer calculated the mean score ($\bar{x}$) of the pupils in general as follows:

$$N = 55$$
$$\sum Fx = 3822.9$$
$$= \frac{\sum Fx \sum Fx}{N \quad N}$$
$$= \frac{3822.9}{55}$$
$$= 69.5$$

The mean score ($\bar{x}$) is 69.5. This score lies between 66-79. According to Arikunto (1987), this score is as same as level B.

5.   DISCUSSION

Based on the findings, we can see that 16.36% (9 out of 55 students) who scored between 80 and 100 had very good proficiency in mastering English vocabulary. Additionally, there were 21.82% of students (12 out of 55 students) who were in level B, which means that their English proficiency in mastering vocabulary was good. Interestingly, the same number of students, i.e. 12 students (21.82%), also achieved level C, meaning that they had fair English proficiency in mastering vocabulary. There were 10 students (18.18%) who had poor proficiency in mastering English vocabulary, with scores between 40 and 55. Finally, two students (3.64%) failed as they had the lowest scores, which were in scale E (34.6 and 26.9). From the findings, we can assume that time did not influence their scores. In fact one student who did the test in the shortest time (5 minutes) has the highest score (92.3).

By and large, it seems that the pupils' proficiency in mastering English vocabulary after three years of studying at SD Methodist Banda Aceh was good. More than 50% of pupils could answer the questions quickly and correctly. Also from the results of this research only 4 (four) out of 55 (fifty five) pupils answered the questions less than 50% correctly. However, no one answered 100% correctly. The statistical analysis showed that the mean score ($\bar{x}$) of the pupils was 69.5, with the highest score at 92.3 and the lowest score at 26.5. Based on this finding, it showed that the pupils' average proficiency in mastering English vocabulary was in level B, indicating that their proficiency on English vocabulary achievement was good.

Furthermore, the findings obtained in this study undoubtedly have pedagogical implications for the students, especially in terms of designing the materials and developing appropriate classroom activities for young children. Since vocabulary plays an important role in learning English, course designers and teachers should consider developing appropriate materials and activities for the classroom. The materials and the activities should be varied and interesting to increase the students' motivation to learn English vocabulary. Lightbown and Spada (2006) believed that varying activities, tasks, and materials are able to increase students' motivation.

6. CONCLUSION

As this study only focuses on finding out the elementary school pupils' proficiency in mastering English vocabulary after three years of studying English, the writer concludes that the pupils of SD Methodist had achieved good proficiency in English vocabulary. This was shown by the mean score ($\bar{x}$) found, which was 69.5. The mastery of English vocabulary amongst the pupils differed even though they were in the same grade and at the same school. The higher level or grade the pupil was, the more vocabulary knowledge he/she should get. Therefore the writer suggests that English should be taught at an early age in order to prepare the potential of young generation in the future who are ready to compete in the global era where English plays an important role. The teaching of English to young children should start from a simple step that is vocabulary activity. Thus, the teacher should enrich the pupils with extensive vocabulary. He or she should consider providing various interesting materials leading to interactive and enjoyable classroom activities in teaching English to young learners. The activities such as singing songs, telling stories, playing games, and using colourful

pictures may attract their attention and increase their motivation to learn English, especially vocabulary.

Nonetheless, it is clear that this study also has a number of limitations. Firstly, this study employed only a small number of students as the sample. As a result, the findings may not be generalized to other students at other schools. Also, the test given to the students in this study consisted of only a limited number of words that cannot measure the whole vocabulary that they have attained after three years of studying English at elementary school. Therefore, further research with a larger scale sample and a larger vocabulary test could be conducted in the future.

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