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Learning Words That Stay: A Qualitative Exploration of Vocabulary Mastery in a Rural EFL Classroom

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Abstract

The mastery of vocabulary is obviously a key problem for English language learners, especially in rural areas where students have little access to English. The main objective of this study is to investigate the problems encountered by ninth graders in memorizing English vocabulary and, at the same time, look into methodologies utilized to enhance their mastery of vocabulary in a rural EFL classroom. One English teacher and 30 ninth-grade students of a rural junior high school in Indonesia were the participants of this descriptive qualitative research. Data were obtained through observations of classes, semi-structured interviews, and a document review. Results show that the students have battled hurdles to memorize new vocabulary because of a lack of frequent repetitions, inferior learning motivation, and inadequate chances for using English outside the classroom. Although various teaching methods, including vocabulary games, drilling, use of visual media, and rewriting-related activities, were presented in instruction, none of these strategies was used regularly or systematically. The vocabulary that students learned to memorize was retained at a low level. The research will help with incremental vocabulary mastery reinforcement via regular repetition, interactive learning, and vocabulary use in a meaningful context, mirroring the learner's surrounding environment. These results underscore the need for vocabulary instruction customized to rural EFL class settings.
Keywords: vocabulary mastery, rural EFL classroom, descriptive qualitative study

Introduction

Learning vocabulary is a fundamental component of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, as it significantly influences learners' ability to comprehend texts and communicate effectively. "Previous studies have shown that insufficient vocabulary mastery can hinder students' performance across all language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Alqahtani, 2021; Fitrianti, 2023)".Research has also indicated that many EFL learners experience difficulties in developing vocabulary mastery due to limited repetition, low motivation, and inadequate exposure to English beyond the classroom (Laoli, 2025).

Despite the recognized importance of vocabulary mastery, many EFL learners continue to experience difficulties in achieving sustainable vocabulary development. Fitria reported that although students are able to learn new vocabulary during classroom instruction, they often struggle to retain and apply these words over time (Fitria, 2022; Zarrati, 2024). This indicates that vocabulary mastery is closely related to learners' ability to retain and retrieve vocabulary beyond initial learning sessions (Mueller & Hays, 2022). Without sufficient reinforcement through repetition and meaningful use, vocabulary knowledge tends to remain superficial and is easily forgotten (Lai, C.,& Wang, Q. 2025). As a result, learners may demonstrate limited progress in vocabulary mastery despite continuous exposure to new lexical items.

Lately, researchers have been digging into the reasons behind these mastery issues in

EFL environments. Findings show that factors like not enough repetition, lack of student drive, and scarce exposure to English beyond the classroom play a big role in how well learners stick with new words (Ihsani, P. F., 2025). Meanwhile, other investigations highlight how teaching methods such as spaced-out repetition, active recall exercises, and learning vocab in context can really boost lasting mastery (Khan, B., 2025).

Recent studies have emphasized how interactive learning and tech-based tools can really boost vocabulary mastery. Things like games, digital apps, and visual aids seem to ramp up learner participation and motivation, which are key for keeping vocabulary skills going strong (Haque, A.,2024). By implementing these strategies, learners are given opportunities to practice and apply vocabulary meaningfully, contributing to the development of vocabulary mastery.

Although previous studies have extensively examined vocabulary mastery and instructional strategies in EFL contexts, most of these investigations have been conducted in urban or well-resourced educational settings. In such contexts, students generally benefit from greater exposure to English, wider access to learning materials, and more opportunities to practice vocabulary beyond the classroom. In contrast, rural EFL classrooms often present distinct learning conditions, including limited English exposure, restricted instructional resources, and minimal opportunities for authentic language use. These contextual constraints may significantly influence how students develop and sustain vocabulary mastery.

To fill this gap, my study dives into vocabulary mastery for ninth-grade students in a rural EFL class, and it checks out the strategies teachers and students use to help keep words in their long-term memory. Accordingly, this study is guided by two main research questions: (1) How is vocabulary mastery demonstrated by ninth-grade students in a rural EFL classroom? and (2) What factors and instructional strategies influence the development of vocabulary mastery in a rural EFL classroom? What makes this research stand out is its qualitative angle on genuine vocabulary practices in an Indonesian junior high school in a rural area, providing insights tailored to the context that could really help shape vocabulary teaching in similar rural EFL environments.

Method

The present study employed a descriptive qualitative design to go deep inside the ninth grade EL classroom of EFL in order to know well how the learners remember vocabulary and what strategies that help them with remembering. A qualitative approach was used to “examine the process, experiences, interactions and context of vocabulary learning” (Teymouri, R.,2024) not to measure its results. The nature of the research as descriptive allowed the researcher to “see” and describe what happened in the classroom when it did, rather than manipulation of factors or use of experimental procedures. This method enabled the research to record actual behavior, instruction methods and learner responses of vocabulary mastery.

To provide a clear overview of the research process, a research flowchart is presented to illustrate the stages of the study, including the research design, research site and participants, data collection techniques, data analysis procedures, and interpretation of findings.

Research Procedure

The overall research procedure of this study is illustrated in Figure 1.

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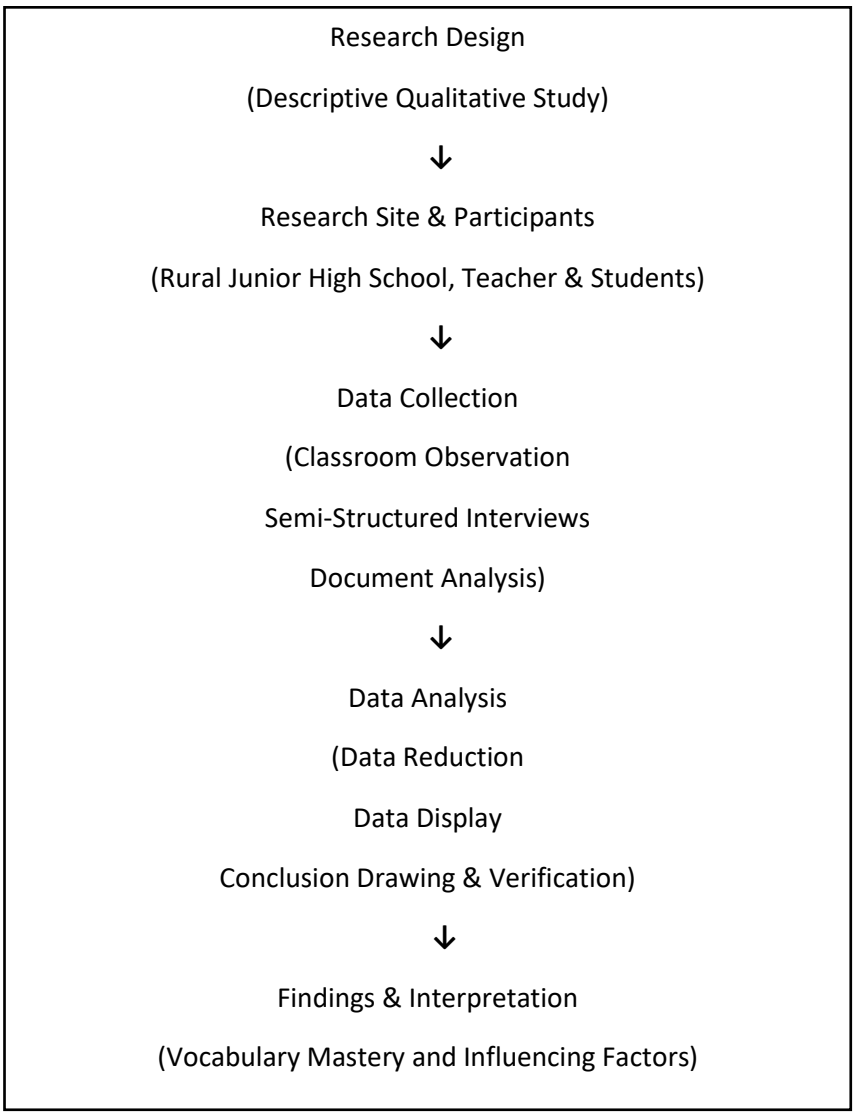


Figure 1. Research Flowchart of the Study

Research Site and Participants

The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 2 Samaturu, located in Kolaka Regency, Southeast Sulawesi, Indonesia. This school was selected because it represents a rural EFL learning context characterized by limited exposure to English outside the classroom and restricted access to learning resources.

The participants of this study consisted of one English instructor and 30 ninth-grade students from one intact class. All students and the instructor were involved in classroom observations to capture authentic instructional practices and students' vocabulary learning behavior during regular English lessons.

For the semi-structured interviews, purposive sampling was employed. The English instructor was purposively selected due to direct responsibility for teaching the observed class and experience in a rural EFL context, which enabled the provision of relevant insights into instructional practices and challenges related to vocabulary mastery. In addition, a smaller group of students was selected for interviews based on their level of classroom participation, observed vocabulary learning behavior, and willingness to share their learning experiences. This selection was intended to represent diverse perspectives on vocabulary mastery within the classroom.

A summary of the research participants involved in each data collection technique is presented in Table X.

Table 1. Research Participants

Data Collection Technique	Participants	Number	Description
Classroom Observation	Ninth-grade students	30	All students in the observed class participated during regular English lessons
Classroom Observation	English instructor	1	The English instructor responsible for teaching the observed class
Semi-Structured Interviews	English instructor	1	Selected due to direct teaching responsibility and rural EFL teaching experience
Semi-Structured Interviews	Ninth-grade students	6	Selected through purposive sampling to represent varied vocabulary mastery and participation

1. Classroom Observations:

During regular English lessons, classroom observations were conducted observations to track how vocabulary was introduced, gauge student engagement, and see whether the teaching approaches supported or hindered their ability to hold onto those words. My focus was on the classroom dynamics, like the teacher's directions, the activities we did, how much students got involved, and the ways we reviewed material. I jotted down systematic field notes with the help of an observation guide, zeroing in on things such as the teaching tactics used, student responses, the buzz of interactions, and if vocabulary drills involved any repetition.

2. Semi-Structured Interviews:

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the English instructor and selected ninth-grade students to gain detailed information about their experiences, perceptions, and challenges related to vocabulary mastery. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in a quiet room at the school to support participant comfort and ensure the quality of the data. Each interview lasted approximately 15–25 minutes and was carried out in Indonesian so that participants could express their ideas clearly.

An interview protocol was prepared prior to data collection to guide the interview process. The protocol included open-ended questions covering several key areas, such as vocabulary teaching practices, vocabulary learning strategies, difficulties encountered in mastering vocabulary, learning motivation, and exposure to English both inside and outside the classroom. Although the same guiding questions were used for all participants, follow-up questions were included when needed to clarify responses and explore relevant issues in greater depth. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed for data analysis.

3. Document Analysis:

To bolster the insights from observations and interviews, I reviewed supporting materials such as lesson plans, student notebooks, vocabulary lists, and various teaching resources. These documents offered extra perspectives on how teaching was conducted, how content was organized, and how student progress was recorded. Through this document analysis, I was able

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to verify if the vocabulary instruction aligned with the intended learning goals for the students, and check whether elements like repetition or real-world application were emphasized in the overall lesson design.

Data Analysis Technique

Data gathered from observations, interviews, and documents were examined using the interactive approach created by (Miles at al., 2020), which comprises three key phases: data reduction, data display, and drawing or verifying conclusions.

Data analysis was conducted using the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which involves data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction was carried out by reviewing and selecting relevant information obtained from classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, while removing data that were not related to vocabulary mastery, influencing factors, and instructional strategies. The reduced data were then coded and grouped into categories to identify recurring patterns and themes. Following this process, the organized data were presented in the form of narrative descriptions and tables to facilitate interpretation and comparison across data sources. Finally, conclusions were drawn through an iterative process by examining emerging themes and verifying them through data triangulation to ensure the credibility and consistency of the findings.

Results

This section outlines the insights obtained from classroom observations, interviews, and document assessments. The outcomes underscore how ninth-grade students in the rural English as a Foreign Language classroom retained vocabulary, along with the various elements affecting their memory and involvement in vocabulary acquisition. In general, the research indicates that students faced significant challenges in retaining vocabulary over extended periods, even though they were regularly exposed to new words during their lessons.

Students' Vocabulary Mastery

Table 1. Summary of Findings on Students' Vocabulary Mastery

Data Source	Key Findings
Classroom Observation	Students were able to recall new vocabulary immediately after instruction but showed difficulty retrieving the same words during review activities and follow-up tasks. Limited confidence was observed during oral recall and spontaneous questioning.
Student Interviews	Many students reported forgetting newly learned vocabulary within three to five days. Difficulties related to spelling, pronunciation, and word meaning were frequently mentioned, especially when vocabulary was not practiced repeatedly.
Teacher Interview	The instructor observed that students often recognized vocabulary during initial lessons but struggled to apply it in subsequent activities, indicating limited vocabulary mastery over time.
Document Analysis	Students' notebooks mainly contained lists of words and Indonesian meanings, with minimal use of example sentences or contextual practice.

	Evidence of systematic vocabulary review was limited.

Findings from the observations and interviews demonstrated that numerous students had a hard time keeping vocabulary in mind for more than a fleeting moment. The classroom observations revealed that while students often managed to recall new words shortly after they were taught, their ability to retrieve the same vocabulary a few days later was notably lacking. Some students confessed they found it challenging to remember words even from the previous week, mentioning that the terms seemed unfamiliar once the lessons transitioned to different subjects.

The teacher also shared worries about the patterns of mastery, observing that students frequently seemed to recognize the vocabulary during the initial learning phase but later struggled to remember or apply the same words in follow-up tasks. This concern became especially apparent during review activities, impromptu questions, and oral recall exercises, where only a few students could confidently use the words that had recently been introduced.

According to students' feedback in the interviews, many indicated that they started to forget vocabulary three to five days after the lessons. This conclusion matches the notes from observations, which documented poor recall rates and hesitation during vocabulary review sessions. Students admitted that without repeated practice, vocabulary faded from their memories quite rapidly. Moreover, many expressed uncertainty regarding spelling, pronunciation, and definitions after only a brief period of not using the words.

These findings reinforce the idea that vocabulary mastery among students in the observed classroom was generally low, indicating that meaningful reinforcement and regular review did not happen often enough to facilitate long-lasting memory.

Factors Related to Vocabulary Mastery

An examination of the data identified several elements linked to students' mastery success, including the frequency of repetition, learning techniques, classroom exposure, and outside learning circumstances. These aspects are summarized in the table below:

Table 1. Summary of Students' Vocabulary Mastery and Influencing Factors

Observed Aspects	Percentage (%)
Students who forgot new vocabulary within 3–5 days	52
Students who regularly reviewed vocabulary	35
Students using games or visual media to practice vocabulary	46
Students relying mainly on memorization or copying	41
Students reporting limited English exposure outside school	60

As presented in Table 1, several factors were found to influence students' vocabulary mastery, including the frequency of repetition, learning strategies, classroom activities, and exposure to English outside the classroom. Data from classroom observations, interviews, and document analysis indicated that limited practice and insufficient reinforcement were major factors contributing to students' difficulties in mastering vocabulary.

Interview findings showed that many students rarely reviewed newly learned vocabulary after lessons. One student explained, "I usually remember the words during the lesson, but after a few days I forget them because I do not review them again" (Student 3). This lack of regular repetition contributed to weak vocabulary mastery over time.

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Learning strategies were also found to affect vocabulary mastery. Several students reported relying mainly on memorization or copying words from the board without meaningful use. As one student stated, “I just write the words in my notebook and try to memorize them, but I am not sure how to use them in sentences” (Student 5). Such passive learning strategies limited students’ ability to apply vocabulary in different contexts.

In addition, limited exposure to English outside the classroom emerged as an important factor. Many students mentioned that English was rarely used beyond school hours. One student noted, “I almost never use English at home or with my friends, so I only learn English in class” (Student 1). This limited exposure reduced opportunities for natural vocabulary reinforcement.

The English instructor expressed similar concerns, emphasizing that insufficient practice time affected students’ vocabulary mastery. The instructor stated, “Students can remember the words when they are first taught, but if the words are not used again, they quickly forget them.” This finding indicates that vocabulary mastery was strongly influenced by the amount of meaningful practice provided during and after classroom instruction.

The information shows that over half of the students (52%) lost their understanding of new vocabulary after just a few days. In contrast, only 35% participated in regular vocabulary reviews, while 41% mostly relied on memorization or copying—methods that tend to provide only temporary advantages. Interviews indicated that students often leaned heavily on their notebooks, suggesting that their approach to vocabulary learning was more passive rather than engaging.

Furthermore, 60% of the students indicated that their exposure to English outside of school was extremely minimal. Many mentioned that they seldom encountered or practiced English beyond their lessons, making their classroom experience their only direct interaction with the language. This deficiency in outside exposure restricted chances for natural reinforcement, which led to quicker forgetting. These factors together stress that the mastery of vocabulary was heavily impacted by the quantity of meaningful practice students engaged in, both during and after class. Without sufficient repetition and contextual use, newly learned vocabulary struggled to be stored in long-term memory.

Classroom Vocabulary Learning Activities

Observations of classroom sessions showed considerable differences in student involvement based on the instructional methods used. Learning experiences that included interactive components—like vocabulary games, quizzes, or visual supports—resulted in greater enthusiasm and participation. During these sessions, students seemed to be more confident, relaxed, and eager to try out the language.

On the other hand, lessons that primarily involved writing out vocabulary lists, memorizing through repetition, or short drill exercises displayed noticeably less engagement. Many students seemed less inspired in these circumstances, and their focus appeared to wane. While these activities allowed for initial exposure, they did not seem to provide strong reinforcement, especially since they lacked prolonged practice or contextual use.

An analysis of the students' notebooks confirmed these observations. Although students consistently logged vocabulary items during lessons, there was little evidence of organized review or repeated application. Vocabulary notes often consisted solely of single-word translations without examples or context to enhance understanding. This trend suggests that vocabulary learning mainly revolved around recognizing forms instead of internalizing them over time.

Findings from document analysis supported the results of classroom observations and interviews. An analysis of students’ notebooks showed that vocabulary learning mainly involved recording new words along with their Indonesian meanings, with limited use of example

sentences or contextualized practice. Evidence of systematic vocabulary review across lessons was minimal. Furthermore, an examination of lesson plans and teaching materials indicated that vocabulary activities were generally introduced at the beginning of lessons but were not consistently reinforced through follow-up tasks or review activities.

Overall, the findings indicate that even though vocabulary instruction was consistently present in the classroom, the methods employed were not reliably implemented to foster mastery. The lack of regular review and the scarcity of interactive learning experiences impacted students' ability to remember vocabulary as time passed.

Discussion

Main Results

The findings indicate that vocabulary instruction in the observed rural EFL classroom has not yet fully supported sustainable vocabulary development. Although students were able to recall newly introduced vocabulary during lessons, their ability to retain and use these words over time was limited. This suggests that vocabulary learning tended to remain short-term and recognition-based, rather than developing into stable and long-lasting lexical knowledge.

One key issue identified in this study is the limited use of systematic review across lessons. Vocabulary items were introduced but not consistently revisited in subsequent sessions. Research on spaced repetition highlights that learning becomes more durable when exposure is distributed over time rather than concentrated in a single session (Zhang & Liu, 2025; Khan et al., 2025). When opportunities for repeated retrieval are limited, vocabulary is less likely to be consolidated into long-term memory. The absence of structured recycling in the observed classroom may therefore explain the instability of students' vocabulary retention.

In addition, students mainly relied on memorizing vocabulary lists and copying word meanings. While this approach may support initial recognition, it does not necessarily promote deeper understanding. Mueller and Hays (2022) argue that vocabulary knowledge becomes more durable when learners actively retrieve, process, and apply words in meaningful contexts. Without such engagement, lexical knowledge tends to remain superficial and less flexible.

Linking Findings to Key Issues in the Research Topic

These findings are consistent with broader discussions in vocabulary acquisition research, which emphasize that vocabulary mastery requires repeated exposure and meaningful use. Studies on retrieval-based practice and distributed learning demonstrate that active recall across multiple sessions significantly enhances long-term retention (Price et al., 2025; Zhang & Liu, 2025). The limited integration of these practices in the observed classroom provides a possible explanation for students' rapid forgetting.

Furthermore, vocabulary mastery extends beyond remembering definitions; it involves the ability to use words accurately and appropriately in context. Research suggests that deeper processing—such as constructing sentences, engaging in communicative tasks, or applying vocabulary in varied contexts—supports stronger retention compared to memorization alone (Mueller & Hays, 2022). In the observed classroom, vocabulary learning focused primarily on word–meaning pairs, with fewer opportunities for contextual or productive use. This instructional emphasis may have constrained the development of more comprehensive lexical knowledge.

The rural context also plays a significant role in shaping vocabulary outcomes. Lai and Wang (2025) highlight that informal exposure to English outside the classroom contributes positively to vocabulary growth through incidental learning. However, students in this rural setting reported minimal exposure to English beyond school hours. As a result, classroom

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instruction became the primary source of vocabulary input and reinforcement. When classroom practices did not provide sufficient repetition and contextual engagement, opportunities for sustainable vocabulary development were reduced. This finding underscores the interaction between environmental limitations and instructional design in rural EFL settings.

Although interactive strategies such as games and visual media have been shown to enhance engagement and support vocabulary learning (Haque et al., 2024; Najafi Karimi et al., 2025), their impact depends on consistent and structured implementation. In the observed classroom, these strategies were applied only occasionally, which may have limited their effectiveness in supporting long-term retention.

The findings suggest that vocabulary instruction in rural EFL classrooms would benefit from more structured and continuous reinforcement. Teachers may consider implementing systematic review cycles that revisit previously learned vocabulary in different contexts. Distributed practice and retrieval-based activities, as supported by Zhang and Liu (2025), can strengthen memory consolidation and reduce rapid forgetting.

Additionally, vocabulary instruction should move beyond memorization toward meaningful application. Encouraging students to use vocabulary in sentences, short dialogues, and communicative tasks may promote deeper processing and stronger retention. Given the limited exposure to English outside school, classroom activities should intentionally provide repeated and meaningful opportunities for vocabulary use.

This study was conducted in a single rural junior high school with a limited number of participants, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, the qualitative design focused on interpretive insights rather than long-term measurement of vocabulary growth. Future research may adopt longitudinal or mixed-method approaches to examine how structured repetition and contextualized instruction influence vocabulary mastery over time in rural EFL contexts.

Conclusion

This study found that vocabulary mastery among ninth-grade students in a rural EFL classroom was generally low. While students were able to recall newly introduced vocabulary immediately after instruction, they had difficulty retaining and using the same vocabulary over time. The findings indicated that limited repetition, insufficient reinforcement, passive learning strategies, and minimal exposure to English outside the classroom were the main factors influencing this condition. Instructional practices that relied heavily on memorization and copying were less effective in supporting sustained vocabulary mastery, whereas interactive and contextualized activities showed greater potential but were not consistently applied. Overall, the results suggest that students' vocabulary mastery in the rural EFL context was restricted by limited opportunities for meaningful practice and continuous reinforcement.

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