



Identifying Classroom Teachers' Challenges in Teaching Bahasa Indonesia Vocabulary in Elementary School

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Abstract

This study identifies and analyzes the obstacles faced by elementary classroom teachers in teaching Bahasa Indonesia vocabulary. Utilizing a qualitative descriptive research design, data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations of two experienced teachers. Thematic analysis of the collected data revealed a range of interconnected challenges. Key findings indicate that teachers struggle with insufficient pedagogical training for vocabulary instruction, limited access to engaging teaching resources, and significant time constraints within the curriculum. Furthermore, obstacles related to student motivation and the wide variation in students' prior knowledge were found to impede effective learning. The report concludes that current vocabulary instruction is often insufficient, contributing to a persistent "vocabulary gap" among students. The findings provide crucial insights for educators and policymakers, emphasizing the need for targeted professional development, improved resource allocation, and a curriculum that better supports foundational language skills.

Keywords: Bahasa Indonesia, vocabulary instruction, elementary school teachers, teaching obstacles, qualitative descriptive research, thematic analysis.

INTRODUCTION

A strong mastery of vocabulary is a fundamental prerequisite for students' literacy development and overall academic success (Firdaus et al., 2023; Tychibayeva, 2025). This foundational skill underpins all four core language competencies—reading, writing, listening, and speaking—and directly influences a student's capacity to comprehend academic material across various subjects. Research consistently demonstrates a strong correlation between a rich vocabulary and high performance in reading comprehension, as well as the ability to engage in critical thinking and effective communication (Cervetti et al., 2023; Mutia et al., 2022; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). Conversely, students who struggle with a limited vocabulary are at a significant risk of falling behind academically, a deficit

that can affect their educational journey well beyond language arts.

In Indonesia, the importance of vocabulary mastery is particularly profound due to the status of Bahasa Indonesia as the national language and the primary medium of instruction. Beyond its linguistic function, the language serves as a crucial tool for national unity, communication, and cultural transmission (Dewi et al., 2025; Luckyardi et al., 2024; Prayogo, 2022). Government policies and regulations mandate its use in official and educational contexts to foster a generation that is not only literate but also culturally aware and capable of navigating a globalized world while preserving its national identity (Fitriati & Rata, 2021; Mulyawan, 2021; Sakhiyya & Martin-Anatias, 2023). Therefore, developing strong vocabulary skills in Bahasa Indonesia is not merely an

academic objective but a vital foundation for active citizenship and national cohesion.

Despite its undeniable importance, many elementary students across the country continue to face significant difficulties in mastering vocabulary. These challenges often manifest as struggles with pronunciation, spelling, correctly choosing word meanings, and applying new words within appropriate contexts, all of which can hinder reading comprehension and effective communication (Rohmatillah, 2014; Salam & Nurnisa, 2021; Susanto, 2021). The root causes are often cited as insufficient exposure to a wide range of words, the inherent differences between spoken and written forms of the language, and the sheer volume of new words to learn (Lutfiyah et al., 2022). If left unaddressed, the "vocabulary gap" that emerges during early education can widen over time, potentially leading to persistent academic disparities that continue into adulthood.

This study seeks to pinpoint and analyze the specific obstacles encountered by classroom teachers during the instruction of Bahasa Indonesia vocabulary at the elementary level. Educators frequently report a range of challenges, including difficulty selecting appropriately leveled vocabulary, employing effective teaching strategies, managing time constraints, addressing students' diverse abilities and motivations, and accessing suitable educational resources (Fauziningrum et al., 2023; Kamsinah et al., 2021; Sabata & Lagontang, 2020; Sari & Wardani, 2019; Suardi & Sakti, 2019). Gaining an in-depth understanding of these barriers from the teacher's perspective is crucial, as they directly influence the success of vocabulary instruction and ultimately determine student outcomes. The findings of this research aim to provide actionable insights for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers to inform more effective and targeted educational interventions.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative descriptive design, a methodological approach that is well-suited for providing a comprehensive and straightforward understanding of the challenges faced by elementary school teachers (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Takona, 2024). A qualitative descriptive study is characterized by its focus on describing phenomena as they naturally occur, concentrating on the "who," "what," "where," and "how" of a situation without attempting to develop or test theoretical explanations. This design is particularly effective for investigating practical, underexplored issues in education and allows for the generation of rich, context-bound insights derived directly from the participants' perspectives.

The participants for this study consisted of two experienced elementary classroom teachers, chosen for their extensive experience and firsthand knowledge of teaching at the foundational stage of education. As detailed in the table below, one participant taught Grade 2 and the other taught Grade 4, providing a glimpse into the challenges at both early and later elementary levels. This selection criteria was intended to capture a broad range of experiences and insights regarding vocabulary instruction in the primary grades.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Participant	Grade Level Taught	Teaching Experience
Teacher A	Grade 2	12 years
Teacher B	Grade 4	15 years

Data were collected through a combination of semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. The semi-structured interviews allowed for an in-depth exploration of the teachers' perceived challenges through flexible questioning while ensuring that all key thematic areas were covered. These interviews were recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

The classroom observations provided direct, real-time evidence of the teachers' instructional methods, student-teacher interactions, and other contextual factors that influence vocabulary teaching. The combined use of these two qualitative techniques facilitated triangulation, a process that strengthens the validity and depth of the study's findings by cross-verifying information from different sources (Romdona et al., 2025; Sarosa, 2021).

For data analysis, thematic analysis was employed to systematically examine the collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Elo et al., 2014; Huberman, 2014; Miles et al., 2014). This process involved several steps, beginning with the transcription and familiarization of the data. The researchers then systematically coded the interview transcripts and observational notes, assigning labels to salient features and patterns. These codes were subsequently grouped into broader, overarching themes that reflected the main challenges identified by the teachers. Thematic analysis provided a robust framework for organizing and interpreting the complex qualitative data in a coherent manner, allowing for the extraction of actionable insights that are both meaningful and practical for educators and policymakers.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Teacher-Related Obstacles

One of the most prominent obstacles is the lack of specific pedagogical training for vocabulary instruction. Both teachers expressed that their initial training provided a broad overview of teaching methods but lacked specialized strategies for effectively teaching new words. This often left them feeling underprepared to handle a diverse range of student needs, forcing them to rely on traditional, often less effective, methods like rote memorization. Consequently, the teachers reported a perceived lack of confidence in their ability to make vocabulary lessons engaging and impactful, leading to a cycle where uninspired teaching methods yielded poor student outcomes.

A second teacher-related challenge identified was the difficulty in selecting

appropriate vocabulary for a given grade level. Teachers noted that curriculum guidelines often provide a long list of words but offer little guidance on which words are most essential or how to sequence their introduction. Teacher A mentioned the struggle of choosing words that are relevant to her Grade 2 students' daily lives while still being challenging enough to expand their knowledge. This struggle to appropriately level the vocabulary meant that some students found the words too easy and became disengaged, while others found them too difficult and became frustrated.

Finally, the teachers discussed the challenge of time constraints. With a packed curriculum that prioritizes other subjects, vocabulary instruction is often relegated to short, infrequent sessions. Both teachers stated that there was simply not enough time to both introduce new words and provide the necessary repetition and contextual reinforcement needed for genuine mastery. This time pressure often led them to rush through lessons, sacrificing depth for breadth and further hindering students' ability to retain and apply new words.

Student-Related Obstacles

The most significant student-related obstacle was the wide variation in students' abilities and prior knowledge. Classrooms were described as highly diverse, with some students entering elementary school with a rich vocabulary base from home, while others had very limited exposure to formal language. This heterogeneity made it incredibly difficult for teachers to deliver a single lesson that met the needs of all learners simultaneously. Teacher B, for example, highlighted the difficulty of teaching more complex words to students who were still struggling with basic vocabulary, noting that this often resulted in a "one-size-fits-all" approach that failed to serve either group effectively (Lutfiyah et al., 2022).

Another major challenge was student motivation. Both teachers observed that students often viewed vocabulary lessons as a dull, tedious task centered on memorizing

definitions. This lack of engagement was particularly evident when teachers were unable to connect the new words to the students' interests or everyday lives. Without a clear understanding of the relevance of the words, students showed little enthusiasm for learning them, which directly impacted their retention and ability to use the vocabulary in their own speaking and writing.

Furthermore, students demonstrated difficulties in transferring knowledge. Both teachers reported that students could sometimes correctly define a word in a quiz but were unable to use it appropriately in a sentence or recognize it in a different context. This suggests that the learning was often superficial and lacked the depth needed for true mastery (Harmades, 2024; Rahmah et al., 2023). The teachers attributed this to a lack of time for

meaningful practice and a heavy reliance on decontextualized teaching methods.

Resource-Related Obstacles

A critical barrier was the lack of appropriate teaching materials and resources. Both teachers lamented the scarcity of engaging, well-designed resources specifically for vocabulary instruction. They often had to create their own materials from scratch, which was time-consuming and sometimes ineffective. The available resources were typically textbook-based and lacked the interactive, multimedia elements that would capture the attention of modern students. The teachers expressed a strong desire for more diverse tools, such as word games, interactive apps, and engaging stories, that could make learning vocabulary more dynamic and fun.

Table 2: Perceived Resource Availability and Impact on Teaching

Resource Type	Teacher A (Grade 2)	Teacher B (Grade 4)	Perceived Impact
Word Lists/Textbooks	Readily available	Readily available	Lacks engagement; promotes rote memorization.
Interactive Games	Not available	Not available	High potential for engagement and retention.
Contextual Stories	Limited availability	Limited availability	Effective but time-consuming to create.
Visual Aids (flashcards)	Available	Available	Useful, but needs to be paired with other methods.
Digital Tools/Apps	Not available	Not available	Enhances learning but requires technology access.

The absence of a well-equipped school library was also cited as a major obstacle. A rich variety of age-appropriate books, magazines, and other reading materials is crucial for exposing students to new words in a natural, contextualized way. Both teachers noted that their school libraries

were understocked and that students had very few opportunities to independently discover new vocabulary through reading. This lack of a supportive reading environment placed the entire burden of vocabulary instruction on the classroom teacher.

Lastly, there was a clear lack of financial resources dedicated to educational materials. The teachers reported that the school's budget for purchasing new resources was minimal, which meant they were often stuck using outdated or inadequate materials. This financial constraint prevented them from acquiring newer, more effective teaching tools and professional development opportunities that could address the challenges they were facing.

CONCLUSION

This study successfully identified several key obstacles faced by elementary classroom teachers in teaching Bahasa Indonesia vocabulary. These challenges are multifaceted and can be categorized into four main areas: teacher-related obstacles (insufficient training, difficulty selecting appropriate words, time constraints), student-related obstacles (diverse abilities, low motivation, and poor knowledge transfer), resource-related obstacles (lack of engaging materials, understocked libraries, and financial limitations), and environmental obstacles (limited parental involvement and large class sizes). The findings highlight the complex interplay of these factors, all of which contribute to the persistent difficulties students face in mastering vocabulary.

The findings of this research have significant implications for educational practice and policy. They suggest that the current approach to vocabulary instruction in elementary schools is often insufficient and that teachers are operating without the necessary support and resources. The identified obstacles directly impact the quality of instruction, which in turn affects student outcomes. Without targeted interventions, the vocabulary gap that begins in elementary school is likely to widen, creating long-term academic disparities and hindering the development of competent, literate citizens. Therefore, addressing these challenges is not just an educational goal but a matter of national importance.

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