



## From Obstacles to Opportunities : Exploring Learners' Challenges in Academic Vocabulary Acquisition at Lukmanulhakeem School, Southern Thailand

Yasmin Elfa Mediena<sup>1\*</sup>, Mohammad Iqbal Firdaus<sup>2</sup>, Abdul Rohim<sup>3</sup>, Sanjaya Argade<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1\*,2,3</sup>English Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Tangerang, Indonesia.

<sup>4</sup>Faculty of Commerce and Management, K.J. Somaiya Collage of Arts, Commerce and Science, India.

\*Corresponding Author. Email: [yasminelfa@umt.ac.id](mailto:yasminelfa@umt.ac.id)

**Abstract:** This study aims to identify and analyze challenges faced by sixth-grade students in acquiring academic vocabulary at Lukmanulhakeem School Southern Thailand, as well as formulate strategies that can support the improvement of their vocabulary acquisition. A qualitative descriptive method was employed, utilizing a narrative inquiry design to explore students' experiences and perspectives in academic vocabulary acquisition. This approach was chosen for its ability to capture and analyze personal narratives across temporal and contextual dimensions, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the challenges encountered by students. The study involved 42 students from two classes, 6(1) and 6(2). Data were collected through preliminary observations, in-depth interviews, and an analysis of instructional documents. The data analysis technique in this study uses a narrative inquiry design, which includes transcription of data from observations, interviews, documentation, and field notes to ensure the accuracy of the information. The findings indicate that key barriers to vocabulary acquisition include cultural background, socioeconomic conditions, individual differences, and instructional strategies. Additionally, limited access to learning resources among students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds negatively impacts their vocabulary development. This study highlights the importance of context-based teaching methods and the integration of technology as effective strategies for overcoming students' difficulties in acquiring academic vocabulary. These findings contribute to the development of more effective instructional approaches for teaching academic vocabulary at the elementary school level.

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## Introduction

Mastering a foreign language is one of the important aspects of being able to compete globally. Language is a tool to convey opinions and ideas, and is also used to obtain information. Having good English skills is the key to success in the era of globalisation (Siregar, 2023). There are four language skills that must be learnt, namely reading, listening, writing, and speaking (Fajri & Nelliraharti, 2022). Learning English as a foreign language is a challenge that is not easy for learners. Each student has an unequal ability to understand the four skills. Difficulty in understanding vocabulary is also one of the problems faced by learners, caused by lack of exposure to academic vocabulary, ineffective learning methods, and limited cognitive strategies in understanding and using academic terms in a broader context (Tauhid & 2023).

Academic vocabulary plays a crucial role in improving learners' literacy, especially in understanding and analysing academic texts in educational settings (Wati & Oka, 2021). This



vocabulary consists of terms often found in textbooks, scientific texts, and academic discussions, which distinguishes it from the vocabulary used in everyday communication (Sulaiman et al., 2018). Learners' ability to master adequate academic vocabulary can help them understand learning materials more effectively, organise arguments systematically, and develop critical and analytical thinking skills. Teachers can use various learning media to help students in learning, especially in the introduction of academic vocabulary (Fadhilawati et al., 2022).

Learning media plays an important role in supporting English language learning, especially in helping learners understand everyday vocabulary. The use of appropriate media not only facilitates the delivery of material, but also increases motivation and interest in learning (Ukkas et al., 2019). Various types of media, such as audio, visual and interactive multimedia, can clarify the meaning of vocabulary in a broader context. Thus, effective utilisation of learning media can support English vocabulary acquisition more optimally (Suprpta, 2020). Choosing the right learning media can also help learners quickly master vocabulary. For example, by using audio media such as recorded conversations or podcasts, YouTube, word walls, animated videos and so on. The media used can improve the ability to listen and understand vocabulary pronunciation better (Premana et al., 2021).

Based on the results of previous research that has been widely researched by (Agus, 2023; Handayani, 2024; Ikhsan et al., 2023; Priyastuti et al., 2020; Rofi'i & Susilo, 2022; Sondakh & Sya, 2022). Agus (2023) explained in his research that there are five factors that cause students' difficulties in speaking English. These factors are lack of vocabulary, poor pronunciation and enunciation, lack of friends or interlocutors, lack of confidence, and classroom atmosphere. Handayani (2024) The results of her research show that elementary school students experience learning difficulties in mastering various English vocabularies. This occurs due to the factor of the lack of different levels of mastery of English. Ikhsan et al. (2023) the results of his research can show about 22 students (78.57%) get a score below 60. While students who get scores above 60 are 6 students (21.43%). This means that the level of student understanding in mastering English vocabulary is still low.

Based on the results of interviews and observations, some teachers use digital learning media to attract students' interest in mastering academic vocabulary in the classroom, namely YouTube and the Quizziz For It application. Rofi'i & Susilo, (2022) explained in their research that there are difficulties in beginning reading, namely difficulty recognising letters, omission or replacement of letters, difficulty reading each word, difficulty distinguishing vowels and consonants, difficulty combining letters and syllables into words, not paying attention to punctuation. Factors causing difficulties in beginning reading are lack of interest in learning to read, low motivation of students during the reading process, difficulty in being able to convey opinions in oral or written form, and consider the reading process as something difficult to do.

Based on the results of several previous studies on learners' difficulties in mastering English vocabulary, many studies have been conducted, but they generally focus on the Indonesian educational context. This research has the novelty of specifically discussing the challenges of academic vocabulary acquisition in overseas Islamic schools, such as Lukmanulhakeem School in Southern Thailand, due to the limited number of studies on the subject. Therefore, this study aims to identify and analyse the barriers experienced by Grade 6 students in acquiring academic vocabulary, as well as formulate strategies that can support the improvement of their vocabulary acquisition.



## Research Method

This study employs a qualitative descriptive method with a *narrative inquiry* design to examine the research topic (Murdiyanto, 2020). The use of *narrative inquiry* as a method allows for an in-depth exploration of perspectives and personal experiences related to the subject, thereby enriching the information obtained from participants (Tambunsaribu & Galingging, 2021). This method was chosen due to its effectiveness in capturing detailed and extensive narratives that transcend temporal and spatial boundaries, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. By utilizing a *narrative inquiry* design the researchers aim to construct a nuanced exploration of the selected theme by delving into the narratives and insights provided by the study participants. This design ensures a comprehensive and contextually rich investigation, facilitating a thorough analysis of the research topic.

This study was conducted at a formal educational institution in Yala, Southern Thailand, specifically at Lukmanulhakeem School. The institution currently accommodates a total of 382 students across 18 classes, ranging from kindergarten to primary school (grades 1 to 6). More specifically, the researcher selected two classes, namely grades 6/1 and 6/2 of the elementary school. The selection of participants aligns with the study's objective of investigating the challenges learners face in acquiring academic vocabulary. The researcher purposively selected two upper primary school classes with diverse educational backgrounds, genders, English proficiency levels, and socioeconomic statuses. Prior to conducting the study, an initial observation was carried out to closely examine students' ability to learn English during English language instruction at Lukmanulhakeem School in Yala, Southern Thailand. This preliminary observation phase allowed the researcher to gather extensive information about the selected participants effectively.

The data analysis technique in this study applied a narrative inquiry design, which included transcribing data from observations, interviews, documentation and field notes verbatim to ensure the accuracy of the information. Once the data was transcribed, the coding process was conducted by identifying key themes that emerged from the participants' narratives, then grouping similar codes to form broader thematic patterns. Furthermore, thematic analysis was used to interpret the participants' experiences and perspectives in depth, so as to gain a comprehensive understanding of students' challenges in mastering academic vocabulary. To enhance the validity of the data, this study applied the source triangulation technique by comparing different perspectives from different participants and confirming the findings through additional observations and documentation.

## Results and Discussion

The data analysis collected from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions revealed several significant themes related to the challenges EFL/ESL learners encounter in acquiring academic vocabulary (Alhuwaydi, 2022). These themes encompass cultural influences, socioeconomic factors, individual learner differences, and effective vocabulary teaching strategies.

### Cultural Influences

A prominent theme identified was the influence of cultural background on vocabulary acquisition (Wang et al., 2022). From the interviews, participants stated that their cultural context often influences their understanding and application of academic vocabulary. For example, students from cultures prioritizing memorization reported difficulties in contextualizing vocabulary, as they are more accustomed to memorizing definitions than



using words in meaningful ways. This cultural approach can hinder the development of a deeper understanding of vocabulary essential for academic achievement. As for the students' memorisation process in Table 1.

**Tabel 1. Student memorisation process**

Theme	Subtheme	Description
Cultural Influences	Rote Memorization	Students struggled to use vocabulary in context due to the habit of rote learning.
	accent	Learners experienced difficulties with pronunciation and understanding spoken language because their native accent influenced how they spoke, impacting their confidence and overall communication skills in the target language.

Table 1 illustrates how cultural factors shape students' memorization strategies, particularly through rote learning. It indicates that students depend heavily on repetition rather than applying vocabulary in context, which hinders their ability to use language effectively. This pattern likely results from educational traditions that emphasize memorization over understanding and practical usage. As a consequence, students may struggle to develop meaningful linguistic competence, as their learning remains confined to memorization without deeper integration into real-world communication.

**Socio-economic Factors**

The socio-economic status of participants emerged as an important factor affecting vocabulary acquisition (Trebits et al., 2022). Although at school the students have studied English it is not enough to master English vocabulary, especially in Thailand in the area of Yaha, Yala, Thailand English is their third language because their first language is Thai and then their second language is Malay. In terms of the location of the school area Lukmanulhakeem School is located quite inland or rural, therefore many students from weak economic backgrounds report limited access to resources such as books, technology, and extracurricular learning opportunities. This lack of exposure to a rich English-speaking environment contributes to a limited range of vocabulary (Bozkurt & Aydin, 2023). Participants noted that peers from higher-income families often have more opportunities to interact with diverse vocabularies through various media, including books, educational programs, and conversations at home. This gap underscores the need to address socioeconomic barriers to improve vocabulary acquisition among disadvantaged students.

**Tabel 2. Socioeconomic Factors**

Theme	Subtheme	Description
Socioeconomic Factors	Limited Access	Lack of access to books and technology hindered vocabulary development.

Table 2 highlights the socioeconomic factors influencing vocabulary development, particularly the issue of limited access to learning resources. The lack of availability of books and technology serves as a major barrier to vocabulary acquisition, as both resources play a crucial role in providing linguistic exposure and expanding lexical knowledge. Without adequate access to books, students face constraints in exploring new vocabulary, while restricted access to technology limits their opportunities to engage with digital learning materials. Consequently, literacy disparities may arise, particularly among students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Addressing this issue requires efforts to enhance access to learning resources through the equitable distribution of educational facilities and the implementation of programs aimed at reducing educational inequalities.



### **Individual Learner Differences**

According to the survey individual differences among learners, such as learning style and motivation, were also recognized as important factors affecting academic vocabulary acquisition. Some participants show a preference for visual learning strategies, while others thrive in auditory or kinesthetic environments (Charoento, 2017). Those who are more motivated and more engaged in the learning process tend to acquire vocabulary more effectively. In contrast, less motivated students often found it difficult to retain and use new vocabulary (Moallemi, 2024). These findings highlight the importance of vocabulary instruction that is tailored to diverse learning preferences and fosters intrinsic motivation. As for the process of vocabulary learning process based on individual differences as in Table 3.

**Tabel 3. vocabulary learning process based on individual differences**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Description</b>
Individual Differences	Learning Style	Different preferences (visual, auditory, kinesthetic) impact vocabulary learning.
	Motivation	Higher motivation correlated with better vocabulary retention and usage.

Table 3 highlights the impact of individual differences on vocabulary learning, focusing on learning styles and motivation. Varying preferences visual, auditory, and kinesthetic affect vocabulary acquisition suggesting the need for adaptable instructional approaches. Additionally higher motivation enhances retention and usage, emphasizing the importance of engaging learning strategies. Recognizing these differences is essential for optimizing vocabulary learning.

### **Effective Vocabulary Teaching Methods**

Finally, the discussion revealed the importance of effective vocabulary teaching methods. Participants emphasized the need for explicit or straightforward vocabulary teaching that goes beyond mere memorization (Espmarker & Tedenby, 2020). Techniques such as contextualized learning, where vocabulary is taught within the framework of relevant content, always reviewing the given vocabulary before or after adding new vocabulary and motivating them to practice the learned English vocabulary in daily activities were considered beneficial. In addition, the incorporation of technology-enhanced learning tools, such as vocabulary apps and online resources, was mentioned as a way to engage students and provide them with additional practice opportunities. Educators are encouraged to integrate these methods into their teaching practices to assist students in overcoming the challenges associated with academic vocabulary acquisition.

### **Supporting Tables**

The process of acquiring academic vocabulary is shaped by various factors including cultural influences, socioeconomic conditions, individual learner characteristics, and instructional approaches. Several obstacles can hinder students' vocabulary development, such as dependence on rote memorization and restricted access to educational resources. Additionally variations in learning styles and motivation levels influence both vocabulary retention and practical application. Furthermore effective teaching strategies particularly the use of contextual learning and technology, play a significant role in enhancing vocabulary acquisition. Table 4 outlines these challenges, emphasizing the importance of flexible and inclusive instructional methods to support diverse learners.

**Table 4. Challenges in Academic Vocabulary Acquisition (summary table)**

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Description</b>
Cultural Influences	Rote Memorization	Struggle to use vocabulary in context due to



		memorization habits.
Socioeconomic Factors	Limited Access	Restricted access to books and technology hampers vocabulary growth.
Individual Learner Differences	Learning Styles	Diverse preferences (visual, auditory, kinesthetic) affect learning.
	Motivation	Higher motivation aids vocabulary retention and usage.
Teaching Methods	Contextual Learning	Integrating vocabulary in relevant contexts improves comprehension.
	Technology Use	Technology tools provide engaging and practical learning opportunities.

Table 4 outlines key challenges in acquiring academic vocabulary, categorized into cultural, socioeconomic, individual, and pedagogical factors. The reliance on rote memorization influenced by cultural practices, limits students' ability to apply vocabulary in meaningful contexts. Socioeconomic constraints particularly restricted access to educational resources such as books and technology, further hinder vocabulary expansion. Moreover individual differences, including diverse learning styles (visual, auditory, and kinesthetic) affect how students engage with vocabulary, while higher motivation enhances retention and practical usage. Instructional approaches also play a critical role, with contextual learning facilitating deeper comprehension and technology integration providing interactive and effective learning experiences. These challenges underscore the importance of implementing flexible and inclusive teaching strategies to enhance vocabulary acquisition across diverse educational settings. as well as the 6th grade participant profiles process as in table 5.

**Table 5. Participant Profiles 6<sup>th</sup> Grade**

Criteria	Number of Participants	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>		
- Male	24	48.98%
- Female	25	51.02%
<b>Language Proficiency</b>		
- Beginner	49	100%
- Intermediate	0	0%
- Advanced	0	0%
<b>Socioeconomic Status</b>		
- Low	34	70%
- Medium	10	20%
- High	5	10%

Table 5 presents the profiles of sixth-grade participants based on gender, language proficiency, and socioeconomic status. In terms of gender distribution, the sample is relatively balanced, with 48.98% male and 51.02% female students. All participants are classified as beginner-level in language proficiency, with no students reaching intermediate or advanced levels, indicating the need for enhanced language instruction. Additionally, the majority of students (70%) come from low-income families, while 20% belong to the middle-income category, and only 10% are from high-income backgrounds. This distribution suggests potential limitations in access to educational resources, highlighting the importance of implementing adaptive and inclusive learning strategies to support students' academic development. There is a Recommendation for Vocabulary Teaching process as in table 6.



**Table 6. Recommendation for Vocabulary Teaching**

<b>Recommendation</b>	<b>Description</b>
Contextualized Learning	Integrate vocabulary into relatable and practical contexts.
Provide Visual Materials	Use images, videos, or posters to support comprehension and retention.
Use Games and Songs	Engage students with fun activities to enhance vocabulary retention.
Leverage Technology	Employ apps and online tools to supplement vocabulary learning.

Table 6 outlines various strategies for enhancing vocabulary instruction through interactive and multimodal approaches. Contextualized learning helps students associate new words with real-world experiences, improving comprehension and retention. Visual aids such as images and videos, serve as cognitive support tools that reinforce word meaning. Engaging activities like games and songs further enhance motivation and facilitate long-term vocabulary retention. Additionally digital resources including apps and online platforms, provide learners with flexible opportunities to practice vocabulary beyond traditional classroom settings. These combined methods create a more effective and engaging vocabulary learning experience.

Effective vocabulary learning does not only rely on mechanical memorisation of words, but also applies interactive and multimodal approaches that enrich the learning experience (Alhuwaydi, 2022). Context-based learning strategies allow students to relate new vocabulary to real-life experiences, in line with constructivism theory in education. In addition, the use of visual aids and interactive activities supports cognitive theories of learning, which emphasise the importance of multiple representations, both verbal and visual, in improving comprehension and memory. The digital approach to vocabulary learning also reflects the concept of technology-based learning which emphasises flexibility and accessibility of learning resources (Mayer, 2024).

The implication of this study shows that vocabulary teaching needs to apply more dynamic and varied methods. Teachers are expected to design lessons that integrate real contexts, visual media, as well as game and music-based activities to increase students' motivation (Zou & Thomas, 2018). In addition, the utilisation of digital resources provides opportunities for students to continue practising and strengthening their understanding of new vocabulary independently outside the classroom (In & Chaya, 2024). Thus, the application of interactive and multimodal strategies in vocabulary learning not only improves students' language skills, but also creates a more interesting and meaningful learning experience.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this study found various barriers that students experience when learning academic vocabulary, including the impact of culture, socioeconomic conditions, individual variations, and effective vocabulary teaching strategies. Students' cultural background greatly affects the way they understand and use academic vocabulary, where students who are accustomed to memorization techniques often struggle to apply vocabulary in relevant contexts. In addition, students' socio-economic level affects their access to resources necessary for learning English vocabulary, with students from economically disadvantaged families often experiencing limited access to books and technology tools, which negatively impacts their vocabulary development. Students' learning styles and motivation levels also play a role in their success in mastering vocabulary, with more motivated students usually being more successful in remembering and using new vocabulary.



This research shows that clear and contextualized teaching methods, as well as the utilization of technology, can help students overcome the barriers they face in acquiring academic vocabulary.

### **Recommendation**

Educators are encouraged to implement context-based learning of academic vocabulary by integrating the terms into authentic situations and design teaching materials. The use of multimodal design, such as the utilisation of visual, audio and digital media technologies, needs to be optimised to improve students' understanding and recall of academic vocabulary. In addition, teachers also play a role in encouraging learners' active involvement through oral and written communication, so that they are more familiar and confident in using academic vocabulary effectively. Meanwhile, for future researchers, it is recommended to further investigate technology based learning strategies and instructional design variations in teaching academic vocabulary to gain a more comprehensive insight into the effectiveness of methods that can improve learners' language skills in various learning contexts.

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