



Exploring Secondary English Teacher's Belief Towards Vocabulary Learning for Young Learners: An Interview Study

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Article history:</p> <p>Received</p> <p>Accepted</p>	<p>This study looks into one secondary English teacher's beliefs about vocabulary learning for young learners and the contextual factors affecting it, aiming to understand how those both influence her teaching practices. The research uses qualitative methods, specifically interview study, to gather detailed insights into teacher's views, strategies, and the factors that affect her approach to teaching vocabulary. The findings are that the teacher emphasized the role of handwriting in vocabulary retention, believed in the effectiveness of contextual learning for vocabulary acquisition, and considered textbooks essential tools in vocabulary teaching. Additionally, the study identifies key contextual factors, including the teacher's perceptions of vocabulary learning, teacher's education, collaboration with colleagues, and the challenges faced in the classroom. The study concludes that a teacher's beliefs and contextual factors significantly shape her vocabulary teaching practices for young learners.</p>
<p>Keywords:</p> <p><i>Teacher beliefs</i></p> <p><i>Vocabulary learning</i></p> <p><i>Contextual Factors</i></p>	

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INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary acquisition is fundamental to language development, forming the basis for learners to understand and communicate effectively. For young learners, vocabulary mastery is not only crucial for language proficiency but also for their cognitive and academic growth. However, teaching vocabulary to young learners presents unique challenges, particularly for those who are non-native speakers of English. Despite the significance of vocabulary learning, teachers face difficulties in ensuring effective vocabulary retention and application. Young learners often struggle with pronunciation, forgetting words, and maintaining focus, which can hinder their progress in acquiring new vocabulary. This shows the need for effective teaching methods and an understanding of the beliefs that guide teachers' practices in vocabulary instruction.

Recent studies have explored various strategies and methods for teaching vocabulary to young learners. Many of these studies emphasize the importance of context in vocabulary learning, highlighting approaches such as contextual learning, interactive games, multimedia resources, and communicative activities as effective strategies for vocabulary acquisition (De Wilde et al., 2019; S Hasram et al., 2021; Yawiloeng, 2020; Ismatullayeva, 2020). These methods aim to engage young learners and make vocabulary learning more meaningful and enjoyable. Research also emphasizes the need for vocabulary instruction to be engaging and contextually relevant to ensure better retention and application of words in different situations.

Despite the availability of innovative teaching methods, traditional approaches such as rote memorization continue to be prevalent in some educational settings. These methods, which often involve students memorizing lists of words, are criticized for being ineffective in promoting long-term retention and understanding (Fitzpatrick et al., 2008). While some studies have shown that newer approaches, such as the use of digital tools like Quizlet and commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) games, can improve vocabulary learning (Platzer, 2020; Chen & Hsu, 2020).

While previous studies have focused on the effectiveness of various vocabulary teaching methods, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding the influence of teachers' beliefs on their teaching practices, particularly in vocabulary instruction for young learners. Most research has concentrated on the methods themselves, such as digital tools, games, or contextual learning, but few studies have investigated how teachers' perceptions of vocabulary learning shape their instructional choices. Moreover, much of the existing research relies on quantitative approaches or surveys, limiting the depth of insights into teachers' personal experiences and perspectives. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring how a secondary English teacher's beliefs about vocabulary learning for young learners

affect her teaching practices, particularly within the context of a secondary boarding school setting in Bogor.

Based on the identified gap in the literature, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: What are the teacher's beliefs regarding vocabulary learning? What contextual factors affect the way she teaches vocabulary? The objectives of this study are to explore the teacher's beliefs about vocabulary acquisition and to identify the factors influencing her teaching practices. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on examining the teacher's perspective through an interview study, a method that provides richer insights into the teacher's personal beliefs and experiences, and contributes to the understanding of how teacher beliefs influence vocabulary teaching.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design, specifically an interview study, to explore a secondary English teacher's beliefs regarding vocabulary learning for young learners. The design was chosen because it allows for a deeper understanding of the teacher's personal beliefs, teaching practices, and the contextual factors influencing her approach to vocabulary instruction. This method is well-suited to the research questions, as it facilitates an in-depth examination of the teacher's experiences and perceptions. The qualitative approach also provides rich, contextual data, which is essential for understanding the nuanced relationship between teacher beliefs and vocabulary teaching.

The subject of the study is a secondary English teacher from a boarding school in Bogor, Indonesia. The teacher was selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that she had the relevant experience and expertise in teaching young learners, specifically those aged 11-14. The sample is appropriate for the research objectives, as the teacher's perspective provides insights into the instructional practices used to teach vocabulary to young learners in a secondary school setting.

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews conducted over one to three sessions. The semi-structured format was chosen because it allows flexibility in the interview process, permitting the researcher to ask follow-up questions and explore emergent themes while still covering topics related to vocabulary learning. The teacher's responses were audio-recorded with her consent, and the recordings were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The data analysis followed a thematic analysis approach, which is appropriate for identifying patterns and themes within qualitative data. The transcriptions were read repeatedly, and initial codes were applied to relevant sections of the data. Themes related to the teacher's beliefs about vocabulary learning and the contextual factors influencing her teaching practices were then identified. This process was iterative, meaning the researcher refined the themes as the analysis progressed, ensuring that the findings were grounded in the data. The final themes were organized according to the research questions. The data

recorded were the teacher's verbal responses, which were then transcribed for analysis. The analysis was precise, focusing on identifying key themes related to vocabulary teaching, teacher beliefs, and contextual factors.

FINDINGS

1. Teacher's Beliefs Regarding Vocabulary Learning

1.1 Introduction to Teacher Beliefs

When asked about her perception of what 'teacher's beliefs' are, the teacher answered that beliefs play a critical role in determining how a teacher behaves in the classroom. She provided an example, stating,

"If a teacher believes that teaching is simply just transferring knowledge, their classroom practices will likely reflect this by focusing only on sharing information."

When asked to share her own beliefs about teaching, she answered that teaching is not just about transferring knowledge, but also about personal development, improving students' behaviour, and mindset change (e.g., changing students' mindset from "I cannot study English" to "I can study English"). This belief should have driven the teacher to focus on moral education and behaviour correction in addition to academic learning. As mentioned above, initially, the teacher explains that her understanding of teaching goes beyond only transferring knowledge. She believed teaching also involves personal development, behaviour correction, and mindset changes for students. However, when asked how these beliefs affect her classroom actions; the response was focused on academic

1.2 The Importance of Handwriting in Vocabulary Acquisition

The teacher believes vocabulary must be written down to help students connect spelling with pronunciation, a belief rooted in the understanding that English pronunciation and spelling often differ.

".... sedangkan menurut ku, belief ku, vocab itu tuh harus ditulis - karena pronunciation sama spelling tuh beda, misalnya kata "cupboard", kalo spellingnya kan "kab-erd" tuh."

This approach aligns with her overall focus on students internalizing vocabulary through active engagement rather than passive memorization. Additionally, studies have shown that active engagement with vocabulary, such as writing words down, leads to deeper learning compared to passive memorization. According to Schmitt (2008), involving learners in active tasks like writing and using vocabulary in meaningful contexts can enhance retention and understanding. Writing will help them encode the words into memory more effectively because it engages cognitive processes that strengthen mental connections between words' meanings, sounds, and spellings.

1.3 The Roles of Context in Vocabulary Learning

The teacher believes that the most effective way to help students learn new vocabulary is by exposing them to words in meaningful contexts and encouraging active use of those words. This method involves asking students to create sentences with new vocabulary words, focusing on vocabulary production through writing and speaking. The teacher's goal is for students to truly master the vocabulary by actively engaging with it, rather than merely memorising isolated words.

“...Tapi sebenarnya yang paling penting adalah memahami kata secara kontekstual, karena konteks bahasa Inggris dan Indonesia sering berbeda. Misalnya, saat membaca tulisan bahasa Inggris, kita mungkin tidak mengerti semua kata, tapi karena kita tau konteksnya, isi tulisan secara keseluruhan kita tetap paham.”

When it is compared to the glossary list, the teacher showed the dislikes using it, as she feels it reduces students' motivation and engagement. According to the teacher, relying on glossary lists can lead to passive learning, where students focus on memorizing individual word meanings rather than understanding the words within the context of sentences or phrases.

“...karena tidak ada konteks yang jelas, siswa jadi kesulitan memahami keseluruhan makna. Mereka mungkin hanya tahu artinya, tapi tidak tahu bagaimana cara menggunakannya secara tepat.”

This limited way of learning makes it harder for students to use vocabulary well. They might know a word but feel unsure or confused about how to use it in different situations. The teacher says that learning this way can stop students from truly understanding the language and becoming comfortable speaking it.

“..kemungkinan besar siswa akan cenderung pasif dalam belajar kosakata. Mereka hanya fokus pada arti satu persatu kata, bukan pada makna keseluruhan kalimat...”

Furthermore, Indonesian speakers tend to think in their first language, which can cause them to translate word-for-word into English without considering proper English grammar or sentence structure.

“...karena mereka masih berpikir dalam bahasa Indonesia.”

In conclusion, she believed vocabulary is best learned through context, which makes the learning process more meaningful and connected to real-life usage. Important to note though, at the end she admitted that she thinks memorization is indeed important, however she never tried the method of memorization using glossary in her class. Therefore, her perspective on the effectiveness of memorization might be influenced by her lack of experience with this approach. It is possible that her opinion could change if she were to

incorporate glossary-based memorization in her teaching and observe its impact on her students' vocabulary retention.

1.4 Textbook as Tools in Vocabulary Learning

The teacher's teaching approach to vocabulary appears to be closely linked to the use of textbooks, suggesting a dependency between her beliefs and the materials she used. During the interview, the teacher frequently mentioned textbooks as a primary resource for guiding her vocabulary lessons.

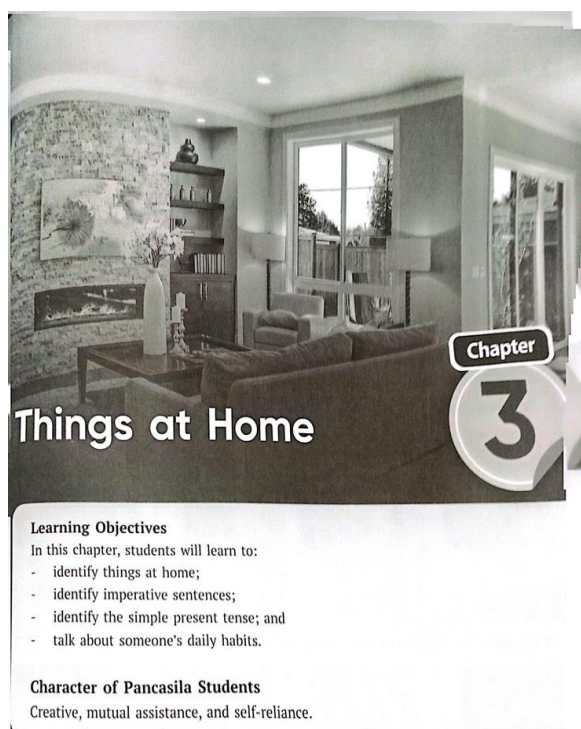
"It depends on the chapter of the book."

"I usually ask them to do an assignment from the book"

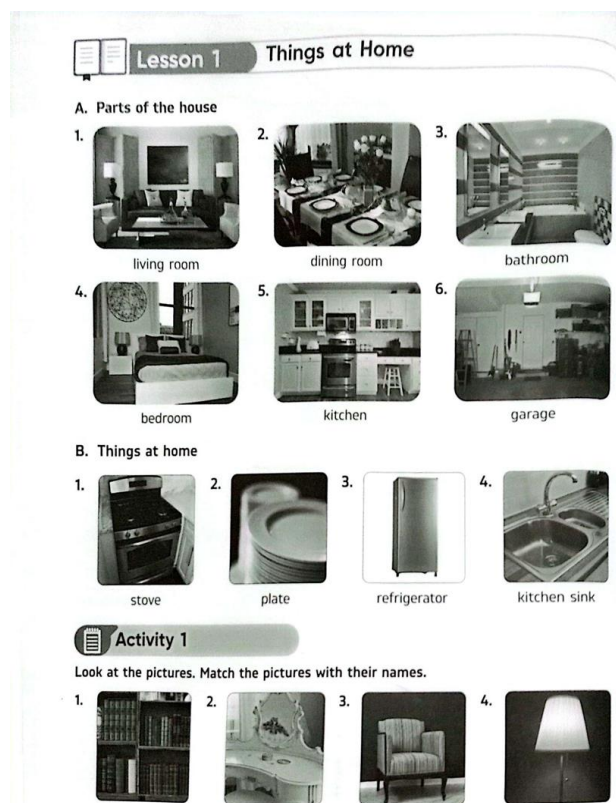
"...the vocabulary themes so far are adapted from the book".

This repeated reference indicates that her beliefs about effective vocabulary teaching are strongly influenced by the school or curriculum. As a result, the teacher's vocabulary teaching practices may lean more towards structured, textbook-based learning. In addition to using the textbook, Emily has created a routine with her students. Whenever they find unfamiliar vocabulary in the textbook, each student writes the new word in their own book. Meanwhile, Emily writes these words on a designated space on the board for everyone to see. The total vocabulary they write also depends on the theme of the book. For example, if the theme is 'Things at Home,' they will naturally have more

words to write since it covers a variety of familiar, everyday objects and places within a home.



Picture 1. Book Chapter in Bupena Merdeka, Chapter 3, Page 77 – A page showing the chapter that guides vocabulary learning.



Picture 2. Vocabulary Learning Material in Bupena Merdeka Chapter 3, Page 78 – A sample page illustrating vocabulary support through visual and contextual materials.

The picture from the textbook shows how themes like "Things at Home" guide the vocabulary the teacher chooses for lessons. This page has words related to parts of the house and items we will find in different rooms. The teacher used this to help students learn vocabulary that matches the topic. Even though she mostly follows the book, sometimes she adds extra material, like videos from BBC News, to give more examples. But even then, the extra material still fits with the theme from the textbook.

2. The Influence of Contextual Factors that Affect the Teacher’s Work

During the interviews, questions were asked about various contextual factors that could influence teachers in her choice of teaching methods. The discussion covered general attitudes and perspectives on vocabulary learning, education, ongoing training, and professional development, as well as collegial collaboration.

2.1 The Perception of Vocabulary Learning

When the topic of glossary lists came up in the conversation, Emily expressed her opinion that they are ineffective and boring, making it difficult for students to learn vocabulary. Instead, she believes that learning from context is the most effective way to acquire vocabulary. She emphasised this point several times, showing her strong conviction about the importance of context in learning. Emily also believes that once students can understand a word and use it—whether verbally or in writing—that is when real learning of vocabulary occurs.

“Yang paling penting adalah produksi kosakata—baik dalam penulisan maupun berbicara—agar mereka benar-benar menguasainya.”

Emily's perception of vocabulary learning was also captured when she was asked how she reviews vocabulary and introduces new words. Her practice is to ask her students to recall vocabulary they have encountered before. For new vocabulary that she thinks her students might be unfamiliar with, she first explains the context, writes the words, and finishes by pronouncing them together in class. She also mentioned that whenever she feels a vocabulary gap, she adds the words herself.

"...saat membahas tentang hewan, saya menambahkan kosakata seperti 'menggigit', 'merangkak', dan sebagainya."

The perception of vocabulary learning can also be captured through Emily's response to the question, "Which words should be the focus and developed further?". Emily answered that it should centre on words that are meaningful and relevant to the students' learning. She chooses vocabulary that her students do not yet know but will find useful, basing her choices on book references, the frequency of the words, and their relevance to the textbook. She also believes in highlighting specific words that are essential. For Emily, seeing students' reactions plays an important role, too—when they look confused, she interprets this as a sign that the word needs extra attention. Overall, Emily's belief is that vocabulary learning should be active and responsive.

2.2 Education

Emily is an official teacher and is a fresh graduate. Interestingly, this is her first official role as a teacher. She has less than one year of teaching experience and comes from an English education background. She expressed that she loves working in education because it feels more meaningful to her; it allows her to make a real impact on student's lives. This sense of purpose and passion drives her motivation to work as a teacher. Prior to joining her current school, she participated in a university teaching program for six months and also worked as a tutor, helping students prepare for university entrance exams. She follows some of the webinar about teaching and stuff, however has never attended a webinar or any other type of training specifically focused on vocabulary teaching and learning.

"Kalo pengalaman professional, saya pernah mengajar saat kuliah, mengajar (di sekolah) yang sekarang, dan pernah juga jadi mentor UTBK."

A teacher's beliefs are heavily shaped by their education, and this connection influences their teaching practices. Therefore, teacher education programs are crucial in shaping these beliefs. Emily's experience as a fresh graduate and a new teacher highlights the critical relationship between teacher education and her beliefs about teaching. With less than a year of teaching experience and an English education background, Emily's approach to teaching vocabulary is likely influenced by her academic training and early professional experiences.

2.3 Collegial Cooperation

In the context of collegial cooperation among teachers, it is common for educators to work in collaborative teams, engaging in discussions about lesson plans, teaching strategies, and student needs (Vangrieken et al., 2015). The structure and frequency of such collaboration can vary across schools and even within different teacher teams, influenced by factors such as school policies, leadership styles, and the specific needs of the students (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012).

Emily, an only English teacher at her school, works independently when planning her lessons. This is a common scenario for subject-specific teachers, particularly in smaller schools where subject teachers may have less interaction with their colleagues (Day et al., 2007). Emily said that her independent lesson planning is a regular practice due to the absence of other English teachers at her school. However, she acknowledged that collaboration does occur when the school implements integrated curriculum programs. In these programs, teachers from various subjects are expected to collaborate and align their lessons to create an interdisciplinary learning experience for students.

Although Emily has not yet personally participated in these collaborative programs, she is aware of how such integration would happen. For instance, she referenced an upcoming school program where students from Grade 9 would visit an island (Pulau Parang, Karimunjawa). The teachers would collaborate to incorporate multiple subjects.

“Nanti yang kelas 9 itu ke pulau parang Karimunjawa, itu kayak semua mapel itu harus masuk di situ gitu, jadi kayak kita diskusi bareng, kira-kira kalau Inggris tuh mau tugasin apa, misal, jika di sana ada turis, berarti mungkin materinya bisa bagaimana cara bertanya kepada turis, atau bikin teks report gitu.”

This example illustrates the way subject integration promotes collaboration among teachers, requiring them to determine how each subject area can contribute to a shared learning goal. Such collaborative efforts are well-documented in the literature, where research suggests that teacher collaboration enhances professional growth, improves teaching practices, and positively impacts student outcomes (Ronfeldt et al., 2015).

She also referenced other programs that combine Qur'an Hadits with other subjects, including English. In one project between Qur'an Hadits and English, students were asked to make a poster about a person who shows a characteristic mentioned in the Qur'an. She also explained how this project is student-centred.

“...dari nyari bahan materi, nentuin konsep, presentasi - bisa team/individu, itu mereka semua yang menentukan. Student-centred gitu lah...”

Again, although Emily's current practice is mainly independent, her understanding of how collaboration would happen in an integrated curriculum program aligns with the broader research on teacher teamwork. Studies indicate that when teachers work together, they are able to create more holistic, student-centred learning experiences (Stanford Graduate School of Education, 2014; Kaput K, 2018).

2.4 Challenges in the English Classroom

One of the challenges in vocabulary learning in the classroom is student motivation. Emily noted that younger students often lack the drive to memorise vocabulary. However, she observed that girls tend to show more awareness and motivation in learning, while boys often struggle with it.

“Perempuan rajin nulis vocabulary list, tapi yang laki-laki ga mau nulis. Mereka maunya kalo sudah tau, ya tau aja.”

“Kelas 7 males. Kelas 8 ada ngeluh tapi gak separah kelas 7. Kelas 9 putra sok sokan, nyepelein, mereka kayak mikir pake prinsip ‘udahlah nanti juga bisa’, kelas 9 putri punya kesadaran sendiri.”

A significant difficulty arises when asking students to recall vocabulary, especially in her 7th-grade class, where many students have had limited exposure to English due to their diverse-school background. She also found it challenging to balance the needs of slower learners without repeating lessons entirely, which can feel unfair to the rest of the class. To address these differences, Emily provided extra attention to those who need it by interacting more with them while discussing vocabulary.

The results presented in this study addressed the research question by providing insights into the teacher's beliefs regarding vocabulary learning and contextual factors that affected the teacher's work. The collected data showed that the teacher's beliefs regarding vocabulary learning were: 1) Introduction to Teacher's Beliefs; 2) The Importance of Handwriting in Vocabulary Acquisition; 3) The Roles of Context in Vocabulary Learning; and 4) Textbook as Tools in Vocabulary Learning. As for contextual factors that affected the teacher's work, they were: 1) The Perception of Vocabulary Learning – where she highly recommended learning vocabulary through context; 2) Education; 3) Collegial Cooperation; and 4) Challenges in the Classroom – which was students' motivation. By adopting an interview study, the research captured an in-depth understanding of the teacher's beliefs.

The results above provided insight into how the teacher conceptualized her work, aligning with previous studies that suggested beliefs were integral to understanding how teachers perceived and defined their roles (Richard, Gallo, & Renandya, 2001). First, the teacher emphasized how important it was to do writing in vocabulary learning. This resonated with Paul Nation's framework on word mastery. As Nation (2001) argued, productive vocabulary knowledge enabled learners to use words accurately and contextually in their own expressions. When she emphasized writing, the teacher reinforced the “Use” component of vocabulary knowledge, which included understanding grammatical functions. Second, the teacher mentioned many times about contextual learning in vocabulary acquisition. This was supported by the Constructivist Theory, which supports the use of contextualized and meaningful learning activities, where students can relate new vocabulary to their experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). Emily's belief that vocabulary should be learned in context rather than through glossary lists also reflected a constructivist approach, as she emphasized the importance of active, contextualized learning experiences for meaningful

vocabulary acquisition. Third, in terms of contextual factors, which is collegial collaboration, Emily's experience as the only English teacher in her school meant that her collaboration with other teachers was limited to school-wide projects. Research suggested that a supportive, collaborative school culture could encourage teachers to adopt innovative practices (Peterson & Deal, 2011), yet Emily's independent role may have restricted her ability to benefit from peer collaboration. Fourth, the challenges Emily faced with student motivation, particularly among younger students and boys, were consistent with literature that highlighted the influence of student demographics and individual learning needs on teaching practices (Gándara & Contreras, 2009).

CONCLUSION

The findings from this study contribute to the understanding of teacher beliefs about vocabulary instruction for young learners, specifically in the context of a secondary English teacher's approach. This research reveals that the teacher places strong emphasis on handwriting for vocabulary retention, contextual learning for meaningful word acquisition, and textbooks as essential resources in structuring lessons. In addition, the study identifies key contextual factors, including the teacher's perceptions, educational background, collaboration with colleagues, and classroom challenges. These factors shape her vocabulary teaching approach.

However, this study's conclusions should be understood within certain limitations. The research was based on a single teacher's experiences, which do not fully represent the beliefs or practices of other educators in different contexts or educational systems. Additionally, as this research relies on self-reported data from interviews, there is a potential for bias in the teacher's responses.

Given the findings, it is recommended that future research should consider exploring how these teacher beliefs influence the teacher's instructional strategies and professional growth in vocabulary teaching. This could provide further insight into the relationship between teachers' perspectives and their evolving practices in language education.

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