AN ANALYSIS OF FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO EFL STUDENTS' CHALLENGES IN LEARNING ENGLISH

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Abstract. This study seeks to examine the factors contributing to students' challenges in learning English at SMA Negeri 4 Kupang. The central research question is: What causes students' challenges in learning English at SMA N 4 Kupang? Employing a descriptive qualitative approach, the research focuses on understanding these challenges through the experiences of 11th-grade students during the 2024/2025 academic year. Data were gathered through interviews with 15 students who reported experiencing difficulties in learning English. The findings reveal three primary factors behind these difficulties: 1) Translation challenges, largely due to a limited vocabulary and a weak grasp of grammar. 2.) Vocabulary limitations negatively affect students' ability to communicate effectively in both spoken and written English. 3.) Low motivation, influenced by repetitive teaching methods, fear of making mistakes, and less-than-ideal class timing. In light of these findings, it is suggested that teachers implement more dynamic and interactive teaching strategies and offer greater support to boost students' confidence. By addressing these challenges, this study contributes to the improvement of curriculum design and teacher training practices aimed at fostering more effective and sustainable English language learning..

Keywords**: **Analysis, Factors of students' challenges, English Learning

INTRODUCTION

As a foreign language taught in schools, English is challenging for Indonesian pupils due to linguistic, contextual, and psychological factors. Linguistically, differences in grammar, pronunciation, and sentence structure—such as tense use and inconsistent spelling–sound relationships—make English difficult to master. Contextually, limited exposure to English outside the classroom reduces opportunities for meaningful practice. Psychologically, anxiety, low confidence, and fear of making mistakes further hinder students' participation. Together, these factors make English a demanding subject for Indonesian learners and highlight the need for effective teaching strategies and supportive learning environments.

Rahayu (2015) mentioned that students have difficulty understanding English since the structures of English and Indonesian are different. As a result, despite having spent a lengthy period learning English, the majority of pupils still find it difficult to grasp. According to Maulana et al (2016), the issues that students have when speaking English include a lack of confidence in their ability to speak and a fear of making errors or inaccuracies, as well as a lack of vocabulary and pronunciation.

Ur (1996:117) identifies several challenges that make speaking difficult, including inhibition, having nothing to say, low or uneven participation, and reliance on the mother tongue. Similarly, Raba'ah (2005:15) emphasizes that various learner-related factors contribute to these difficulties, such as teaching methods, the curriculum, and the learning environment. For instance, students who lack sufficient vocabulary or do not have peers to converse with may struggle significantly with speaking tasks.

Students often encounter challenges when speaking English, including fear of making mistakes, feelings of embarrassment, poor pronunciation, low motivation, limited vocabulary, having no ideas to express, and reliance on their native language (Rahayu, 2020). Factors such as student motivation, personality, and the content of speaking lessons also contribute to weak speaking skills. Generally, the main issue for high school students is inadequate pronunciation and vocabulary, largely due to insufficient practice. At SMA N 4 Kupang, English is a mandatory subject, yet many students find it unappealing. A common perception among them is that English is extremely difficult. Previous research by Agung (2019) describes English as a "foreign" or "alien" language due to its unfamiliarity and complexity, which adds to students' stress, especially when they are faced with assignments.

In a similar vein regarding student assignments, Agung et al. (2020) observed that students often feel overwhelmed by the workload, particularly in the context of online learning. Interestingly, this study also found that students consider traditional classroom learning to be equally stressful (Agung, A. S. N., Surtikanti, M. W., & Quinones, 2020). They reported difficulties in maintaining focus during lessons, which leads to passivity in class. This situation poses additional challenges for teachers, who must spend more time providing individual support and extra explanations. As a result, it becomes difficult to cover the full semester's curriculum. Consequently, the remaining content is delivered within a condensed time frame, which reduces the effectiveness of learning due to cognitive overload. This scenario contributes further to students' struggles in learning English.

According to Blassic and Jones, as cited by Irham and Wiyani (2015), students' struggles with learning English highlight a disparity between the academic outcomes they are expected to reach and their actual achievements (Irham, 2015). In a similar view, Wahab (2015) describes English learning difficulties as a situation where students are unable to learn effectively due to various obstacles or interruptions. Hamdani (2010) further classifies the causes of these difficulties into two categories: internal factors, which arise from within the student, and external factors, which come from the surrounding environment (Hamdani, 2011). Learning difficulties in English are a significant issue for students and deserve serious attention from educators. If left unaddressed, these challenges can negatively affect students' development and progress. Therefore, it is crucial for educators, including both parents and teachers, to recognize and respond to early signs of English learning difficulties to prevent further negative consequences.

METHOD

The present study employs a qualitative. The study was carried out at SMA Negeri 4 Kupang. The population are students of 2nd grade, and the sampling technique used was random sampling (with a total of 15 students) from three intact classes. The researcher used random sampling in order to give the population an equal chance of being selected, which minimizes researcher bias and increases the objectivity of the sample. Data was collected from interviews by asking direct questions. The data analysis involves three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on interviews with 15 students about their English learning experiences, three main issues were identified as obstacles to effective English learning, namely:

1. Translation

a. Difficulties in translation

"Translating has been a challenging experience for me due to encountering unfamiliar words whose meanings I do not understand."

"While translating from English to Indonesian, I often struggle with unfamiliar vocabulary, which requires me to consult a dictionary or search online to grasp the meaning."

b. Lack of Vocabulary

"Translating from English to Indonesian has been difficult for me, as my limited Vocabulary hinders my ability to translate words or sentences precisely."

"I face difficulties translating from English to Indonesian due to insufficient vocabulary."

"I find it challenging to translate from English to Indonesian because I lack a strong vocabulary base."

c. Lack of confidence and afraid of making mistakes

"I lack confidence and worry about making errors when translating directly, so I rely on Google Translate to confirm the accuracy."

"Translating directly from English to Indonesian makes me feel uncertain, so I often use Google Translate to double-check my work."

"I frequently feel unsure of myself when translating English, as I fear making mistakes."

d. Grammar difficulties

"In translation, I struggle with vocabulary and grammar, particularly with elements like verbs and pronouns."

"I encounter difficulties with vocabulary and grammatical aspects like verbs, adjectives, and pronouns."

"This problem often arises for me, particularly when dealing with conjunctions and verbs during translation."

e. Difficulties with unfamiliar words or words not found in dictionaries

"I frequently have trouble with unfamiliar vocabulary, particularly when the word isn't listed in my dictionary, prompting me to look it up online to grasp its meaning."

"When I encounter words missing from my dictionary, I usually turn to alternative tools like Google Translate for help."

"My limited vocabulary makes translation challenging, so I frequently depend on dictionaries or translation tools to interpret unfamiliar words."

One of the main issues the students encounter when learning English is the translation process. Interviews revealed that a significant challenge arises when students come across unfamiliar vocabulary, making it hard for them to translate words or sentences accurately. For example, Student 1 explained, "I struggle when I find new vocabulary, which makes translating words or sentences difficult." This suggests that a lack of vocabulary often causes students to have trouble translating new terms precisely. When students don't understand certain words, their comprehension of the overall text suffers, which negatively impacts their ability to translate effectively.

Similarly, Student 2 shared, "Translating is quite challenging for me because I frequently encounter words that are new and whose meanings I do not know." This demonstrates that limited vocabulary often forces students to depend on external aids like dictionaries or translation software. Although these resources offer

temporary help, they also reveal a deeper problem: students tend to focus on individual word meanings rather than grasping the overall context, which restricts their understanding of idiomatic or nuanced expressions.

Student 6 also highlighted that translating from English to Indonesian is difficult due to vocabulary limitations: "My translation experience is poor because my vocabulary is limited, so I find it hard to translate words or sentences correctly." This reinforces the idea that insufficient vocabulary not only obstructs the translation process but also prevents students from producing accurate and contextually appropriate translations. Even when students understand a word's meaning, they may struggle to find a suitable equivalent in the target language, leading to mistakes.

In addition, Student 8 pointed out that grammar issues, such as difficulties with verbs and pronouns, further complicate translation: "The problems I face involve both vocabulary and grammar, including verbs and pronouns." This illustrates that successful translation requires not only vocabulary knowledge but also a solid grasp of grammar and sentence structure. A weak understanding of these elements can result in inaccurate or distorted translations. Therefore, mastering both vocabulary and grammar is crucial for precise translation.

Furthermore, students' fear of making mistakes can undermine their confidence. Student 8 mentioned, "I feel less confident and afraid of making mistakes when translating directly, so I often check my work with Google Translate." This shows that the anxiety about errors, especially in front of others, often leads students to rely on automated translation tools instead of critically thinking through their translations. While convenient, this dependence on technology can hinder students from developing their translation skills independently and accurately.

2. Lack of Vocabulary

a. Difficulty in Communicating Effectively

"Although I can partially understand my teacher's explanations in English, I still struggle to speak fluently due to my limited vocabulary."

"Because my vocabulary is limited, I find it difficult to express myself clearly in English."

b. Challenges in Pronunciation

"The most challenging part of learning new vocabulary is pronouncing the new words I read."

"Pronouncing newly learned words is the most difficult aspect of expanding my vocabulary."

"For me, the hardest part of learning English vocabulary is pronouncing new words I come across, and I also tend to forget previously learned words."

"My limited vocabulary and shyness when speaking English directly hinder my ability to communicate effectively."

"Having a limited vocabulary lowers my confidence and makes me anxious about making errors when translating words directly."

c. Shyness and lack of Confidence in speaking

"My limit ed vocabulary and shyness when speaking English directly make it difficult for me to communicate clearly."

"Because my vocabulary is limited, I often lack confidence and fear making errors when translating words directly."

d. Difficulty in retaining new vocabulary

"What I find most difficult about learning vocabulary is that I quickly forget what I've learned and struggle with pronouncing new words."

"One of the challenges I encounter in learning English vocabulary is pronouncing words correctly, as the inconsistency between spelling and pronunciation often causes me to forget what I've previously learned."

According to **Nation (2019)**, vocabulary is the foundation of language use, as learners require a sufficient number of words to understand input and to express ideas fluently. When learners possess limited vocabulary, they may still comprehend teachers' explanations or written texts at a general level, but they often struggle to transform that understanding into spoken output. This explains Student 1's experience: comprehension is present, yet fluency is restricted due to insufficient lexical resources..

Recent theories in second language learning emphasize that vocabulary knowledge is essential for effective English communication, particularly in expressing ideas and opinions. Student 6's statement reflects a common issue in EFL contexts: learners may understand English input but struggle to produce meaningful output due to limited vocabulary. According to Nation (2019) and Swain's Output Hypothesis, insufficient lexical resources hinder learners' ability to transform comprehension into spoken or written expression, leading to hesitation, reduced fluency, and limited participation. Additionally, cognitive models of language production suggest that limited vocabulary increases cognitive load, disrupting fluency and clarity.

Overall, these theories confirm that limited vocabulary remains a major barrier to communication, even when comprehension is present. Therefore, expanding learners' vocabulary is crucial for enhancing fluency, accuracy, and overall communicative competence in English.

Pronunciation is essential for effective English communication because it affects both intelligibility and learner confidence. Student 7's experience reflects a common EFL challenge in which difficulty pronouncing new vocabulary discourages students from using words in spoken communication. According to Derwing and Munro's Intelligibility Theory, mispronunciation can cause misunderstandings and communication breakdowns, even when learners know the meaning of words. In addition, Foreign Language Anxiety Theory (Horwitz et al.) explains that fear of mispronunciation often leads to embarrassment and reduced classroom participation. Phonological acquisition theories further suggest that differences between learners' first language and English sound systems contribute to pronunciation difficulties. Overall, these theories indicate that pronunciation is a key component of vocabulary knowledge. Without accurate pronunciation, learners struggle to use new vocabulary confidently and effectively, which negatively affects their spoken communication.

Students' embarrassment and fear of speaking English are linked to both psychological and linguistic factors. Foreign Language Anxiety Theory (Horwitz et al.) explains that fear of making mistakes and negative evaluation can lead students to avoid speaking, limiting opportunities for practice. This is supported by Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, which suggests that anxiety and low confidence hinder language acquisition.

In addition, linguistic challenges such as pronunciation difficulties and the inconsistent relationship between English spelling and pronunciation further complicate vocabulary learning. Orthographic depth theory and phonological processing theories indicate that these inconsistencies increase cognitive load, making it harder for learners to retain and recall new words. Overall, these theories show that the interaction of emotional factors and linguistic complexity reduces students' willingness to speak, impairs vocabulary retention, and negatively affects their English learning effectiveness.

3. Lack of Motivation

a. Influence of Teachers' Teaching Style

"My English teacher's teaching approach and personality aren't very engaging, which leaves me feeling uninterested and unmotivated during lessons."

"Initially, I enjoyed the lessons, but lately, I have grown bored with how my English teacher presents the material."

b. Boredom with the Teaching Approach

"The teacher's method is dull, which lowers my enthusiasm for learning."

"During the lessons, I often feel anxious and uninterested."

c.   Absence of Ice-breaking Activities

"The lessons can be engaging at times, but often become dull since there are no ice-breakers to refresh the class when boredom sets in."

"Since the learning goals aren't shared at the start, we lack a clear understanding of what we're expected to accomplish in the lesson."

d. Afraid of making mistakes

"I struggle with confidence when translating sentences word-for-word due to fear of errors."

"My fear of making mistakes while translating English into Indonesian causes me to feel uncertain about my abilities."

e. Lesson Timing and Its Impact on Motivation

"The classroom is generally fine, but it becomes quite warm in the afternoon."

"The classroom becomes uncomfortable in the afternoon, which makes it hard for me to concentrate during English lessons held at that time."

"English lessons scheduled in the afternoon often leave me feeling bored and unmotivated, making it challenging to stay focused."

Lack of motivation is a major factor impacting students' success in learning English. Interviews revealed that many students lose motivation because the teaching style does not meet their expectations. For example, Student 1 said, "The teaching style and personality of my English teacher are not ideal, which makes me feel bored and unmotivated by the way they explain the lessons." This suggests that a dull or unengaging teaching approach can diminish students' interest and even cause feelings of boredom and reluctance to learn.

Student 2 also noted, "At first, I enjoyed it, but later I became bored with how the English teacher delivered the material." This indicates that if teaching methods are repetitive or fail to capture students' attention, motivation tends to decrease over time. Similarly, Student 11 shared, "I feel tense and bored during the lesson." A lack of enthusiasm for the subject and insufficient classroom support contribute further to this decline in motivation. Student 3 added, "Sometimes it's interesting, but sometimes it's not because there are no icebreaker activities at the beginning of the lesson, which makes it boring." This points to the importance of icebreaker activities in boosting student engagement before lessons start. Without them, students tend to feel disconnected and less involved.

Fear of making mistakes also lowers motivation. Student 6 expressed, "I have a problem with my confidence when translating sentences directly because I'm afraid of making mistakes." This shows that anxiety about errors in translation or speaking can reduce students' confidence and make them hesitant to participate actively. In addition, the timing of lessons affects motivation. Student 15 mentioned, "I feel bored and unenthusiastic during English lessons because the class is held in the afternoon, which makes it harder for me to focus." This suggests that scheduling lessons at less favorable times, such as the afternoon, can decrease students' energy and concentration, thereby reducing their motivation to learn.

Overall, the study indicates that difficulties with translation, limited vocabulary, and lack of motivation are significant barriers to students' progress in English. To address these challenges, it is important to expand vocabulary, build students' confidence, and use more engaging and varied teaching strategies. Teachers should also provide sufficient support and create a positive learning environment to help students achieve their full potential in learning English.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, students' challenges in learning English are caused by a combination of linguistic, psychological, and instructional factors. Linguistically, students struggle with limited vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and structural differences between English and their first language. Psychologically, low confidence, anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and lack of motivation hinder their willingness to use English

actively. Instructionally, factors such as limited practice opportunities, time constraints, and cognitively demanding learning materials further reduce learning effectiveness. Together, these interconnected factors create significant obstacles that affect students' overall English learning performance and proficiency.

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