Students' Difficulties in Learning English at Tunas Ilmu Islamic Junior High School

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Abstract. This study aims to analyse the difficulties experienced by female students at Tunas Ilmu Islamic Junior High School in learning English. English is an important subject in the curriculum, but some students still show difficulties in understanding and using the language effectively. This study uses a qualitative descriptive method with observation, interviews and a questionnaire given to students. The initial results of the essay questionnaire show that 50% of students say they like English lessons, while the other 50% experience difficulties in learning. Meanwhile, the results of the multiple-choice questionnaire showed that students experienced three difficulties, namely difficulty reading sentences, understanding vocabulary, and understanding grammatical concepts. Learning difficulties are a problem that prevents students from following lessons as well as other students in general. Learning difficulties are commonly experienced by students. The results of the study show that the main difficulties students face are in speaking and listening skills, which are caused by a lack of vocabulary, low self-confidence, and limited exposure to English outside the classroom. Another contributing factor is the lack of variety in teaching methods. Therefore, this study is expected to serve as a basis for teachers to design more effective learning strategies that are tailored to the needs of students.

Keywords: Difficult; English; Junior High School; Student; Vocabulary

1. INTRODUCTION

English is an international language that plays an important role in various areas of life, including education, technology, economics, and global communication. Proficiency in English has become a major requirement for the younger generation, as the world of work and academia demands competence in foreign languages. Crystal (2021) states that English is used by more than 1.5 billion speakers worldwide, either as a first or second language, making it the dominant global communication tool. In Indonesia, English is taught from primary school to university as the main foreign language with the aim of increasing the nation's competitiveness in the international arena.

However, in practice, English language learning at the secondary school level still faces many challenges, especially in private Islamic schools, which may lack facilities and exposure to an English-speaking environment. found that junior high school students in Indonesia generally experience difficulties with vocabulary, grammar, and speaking and writing skills. These obstacles often stem from a lack of motivation, limited exposure to English outside the classroom, and minimal opportunities to interact with native speakers.

Difficulties in learning English are influenced by various internal and external factors. Internal factors include motivation, interest, self-confidence, and cognitive abilities, while external factors include teaching methods, learning environments, learning media, and support from schools and families Brown (2007) In language learning, student motivation and attitude

play an important role. Paryanto & Ningsih (1945), Gardner (1985) emphasises that success in foreign language learning is highly dependent on the learner's attitude and motivation: students with a positive attitude towards English tend to perform better than those who consider the language difficult or irrelevant.

Several studies also show that difficulties in learning English tend to be more pronounced at the secondary school level. Early adolescence is a time when students are forming their identities and are prone to losing motivation. For example, Santrika et al. (2025) reported that 60% of secondary school students in Yogyakarta had difficulty understanding grammatical structures and remembering new vocabulary. These difficulties directly affected their reading and writing abilities.

In addition to linguistic factors, psychological factors greatly influence students' language abilities. Anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and low self-confidence often prevent students from actively participating in learning. (Horwitz et al., 2010) introduced the concept of foreign language anxiety nervousness and fear associated with learning or using a foreign language which can inhibit students' desire to speak and express themselves in English.

Taking these various factors into consideration, this study aims to identify the forms of English language learning difficulties experienced by ninth-grade students at Tunas Ilmu Islamic Junior High School and explore the factors that influence their perceptions and experiences during the learning process. This study also seeks to understand why some students enjoy learning English while others find it difficult despite being in the same learning context.

Theoretically, this study is expected to contribute to applied linguistics, particularly in the field of second language acquisition and foreign language learning. Practically, the findings of this study can provide valuable input for English teachers to improve their teaching approaches to better suit the needs and characteristics of students. Teachers can utilise these findings to develop strategies that are more communicative, enjoyable, and contextually relevant.

Furthermore, this study can help schools evaluate the effectiveness of their current English curriculum and programmes. By understanding the root causes of learning difficulties, schools can implement remedial programmes, teacher training, or English extracurricular activities to improve students' abilities holistically.

Therefore, this study is not only important for describing the phenomenon of learning difficulties at Tunas Ilmu Islamic Junior High School, but also for proposing practical, student-centred solutions. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, this study explores students' experiences, perceptions, and obstacles in depth so that the results can be used as a basis for

improving the quality of English teaching in junior high schools, especially in Islamic educational environments

2. THEORITICAL STUDY

Second Language Acquisition Theory

According to Krashen (n.d.), second languange acquisition occurs when learners receive input slightly above their current level of competence, known as the i+1 concept. Learning difficulties arise when the input is too complex to be understood by students or too simple so that it does not challenge their language development. In addition, Krashen explains that emotional factors such as anxiety, shyness, and low self-confidence form an *affective filter* that can hinder the language acquisition process.

In the context of junior high school students, high reading anxiety and fear of making mistakes are often the main reasons for low participation in English learning, particularly in reading and speaking skills.

Learning Difficulties Theory

According to Hewett & Forness (n.d.) learning difficulties are caused by discruption in cognitive processes such as working memory, attention, and information processing speed. In english learning, this is manifested as students having difficulty remembering vocabulary, understanding sentence structure, and effectively processing reading texts.

Theory Synthesis

Based on the two theories above, it can be understood that English learning difficulties in junior high school students are not only caused by language ability itself but are also influenced by input quality, emotional condition, cognitive characteristics, and learning environment. Therefore, understanding second language acquisition theory and learning difficulties theory is essential as a basic for analysis in this study.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a Descriptive Qualitative approach that aims to provide a rich and comprehensive description of students' difficulties in learning English. The descriptive qualitative method allows researchers to understand the experiences, perceptions, and factors that influence students without relying on statistical analysis.

Sunardi et al. (2025) argues that a descriptive qualitative approach is appropriate for investigating language learning phenomena because it can identify students' difficulties, learning motivation, and teaching strategies used by teachers in real contexts.

This study focuses on students' difficulties in understanding English concepts, particularly Reading, Vocabulary, and Structure (grammar). The data sources included classroom observations and interviews. According to Santrika et al. (2025), classroom observations included monitoring the English learning process, noting students' difficulties in understanding the material, and participating actively; these observations were carried out by English teachers. The researcher also collected supporting documents such as test scores, daily assignment sheets, teacher notes, and questionnaire results related to students' learning interests and difficulties.

Sampling used the purposive technique Sugiyono (2021) defines purposive as a sampling technique determined based on certain considerations so that the sample truly represents the phenomenon being studied. The sample in this study consisted of ninth-grade students, who were selected because their daily grades and test results did not meet national standards. The researcher aimed to identify the learning difficulties experienced by students so that English teachers could make improvements. Data were collected through observation and document/archive review, then analysed and used to draw conclusions.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Questionnaire and General Findings

The initial questionnaire distributed to ninth-grade students revealed that the essay results showed that 7 students (50%) stated that they liked English, while the other 7 students (50%) reported difficulties in learning English. This distribution shows significant variation in perceptions and learning experiences among students in the same class. This difference is important because it shows that learning experiences can vary greatly even though the teaching context is the same. Meanwhile, the multiple-choice questionnaire produced several categories of difficulties experienced by students, such as difficulty reading sentences, lack of vocabulary, and difficulty understanding English grammar concepts.

The aggregate results are as follows:

Table 1. Students' Difficulties in English Learning.

Category	Experience Difficulties	No Difficulties	Interpretation
Difficulty Reading Sentences	57,1%	42,9%	Some students have difficulty understanding english texts and sentences
Lack of vocabulary	59,5%	40,5%	The greatest difficulty stems from limited vocabulary
Difficulty in understanding concepts	61,2%	38,8%	Difficulty in understanding grammar and tenses is the most dominant aspects

Difficulty Reading Sentences

A total of 57.1% of respondents reported difficulties in understanding English reading. These difficulties manifested as weaknesses in identifying main ideas, translating sentences, and understanding the context of the text. These findings are in line with Yani et al. (2021) who reported that EFL learners often face challenges in reading comprehension due to limited vocabulary and low reading motivation. Sahid et al. (2024) also emphasises that low reading interest and a lack of interesting English reading materials directly affect text comprehension. In addition to linguistic factors, reading motivation and strategies also affect comprehension outcomes (Sahid et al., 2024). Therefore, teachers are advised to use contextual and engaging texts tailored to students' experiences to increase reading interest.

Lack Of Vocabulary

The vocabulary difficulty category involved 59.5% of respondents, indicating that the majority experienced difficulties mastering English lexicon. Many students could not translate sentences correctly because they did not know the meaning of words or were confused by polysemous words. (shows that vocabulary mastery is a major factor that affects overall English proficiency reading, writing, and speaking. Rosyida et al. (n.d.) emphasise that students with poor vocabulary knowledge have difficulty understanding texts and constructing sentences.

Difficulty In Understanding Concepts (Grammar)

The highest percentage appeared in this category 61.2% indicating that most students had difficulty understanding grammar concepts, especially tenses. Common mistakes included confusion in choosing the correct verb form (V1, V2, V3), correct tense usage, and sentence structure. These findings are consistent with Lestari (2023), who found that many EFL learners fail to understand grammar due to a lack of basic conceptual understanding and ineffective learning strategies. Santrika et al. (2025) argue that tenses are one of the most complex aspects of English language learning for Indonesian students because their structural patterns are very different from their first language.

Factors Causing Difficulties in Learning English

Based on the results of the questionnaire and interviews, the researcher identified two categories of factors causing difficulties for students: internal and external.

Internal Factors

According to , internal factors include student laziness, lack of motivation, and difficulty concentrating during lessons. (Sopiah et al., 2024) also notes that lack of concentration and poor understanding of the material contribute to learning difficulties. From this data, the researchers concluded the following internal factors that influence English language learning at SMP Islam Tunas Ilmu Pagar Alam:

a. Low motivation. Motivation is an internal drive to learn. Without clear goals, students lack enthusiasm for learning vocabulary, grammar, or speaking skills. argue that motivation can increase students' enthusiasm for learning; without interest, learning becomes boring and unfocused. Puspitasari et al. (2023) This problem is closely related to the creativity of teachers in teaching; limited teacher innovation can lead to ineffective learning.

b. Lack of confidence. Many students are afraid of making mistakes when speaking or writing in English. The fear of being laughed at or mispronouncing words causes students to be more silent and avoid practice. Noviyenty (2021) This can be caused by limited vocabulary, and sometimes students understand the meaning but do not dare to use the language because of unclear knowledge of grammar.

c. Inappropriate learning styles Sopiah et al. (2024). Students have diverse learning styles visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. If teaching does not accommodate the dominant learning style, comprehension will be difficult. Teachers must combine these styles to maximise learning outcomes.

d. Cognitive factors. Individual differences in thinking, remembering, and processing information affect performance. Mahrina et al. (2023) Some students struggle with structure or pronunciation due to cognitive limitations and may assume that English is difficult or only for "smart" students.

External Factors

a. Inappropriate teaching methods. Teachers' teaching methods greatly influence students' understanding. If teachers focus only on grammar without practising speaking or listening skills, students become passive. For example, continuous lectures without interactive activities (role-playing, games) limit student engagement. Teachers' competence and attitude are also important teachers who lack confidence or are not proficient in English can

reduce students' interest; teachers who are overly critical or impatient can discourage students from participating (Sugiyono, 2021).

b. An unsupportive learning environment. A learning environment that does not provide opportunities to practise English results in limited student interaction Dini & Aslamiah (2020). The absence of an "English zone" at school or English extracurricular activities reduces opportunities for practice. The peer environment also influences engagement: if classmates are not interested, students may feel embarrassed or unmotivated to practise.

Strategies to Overcome Difficulties in Learning English

There are several alternatives that teachers can implement to help students overcome these difficulties. Dini & Aslamiah (2020), citing Syah (2000), recommends steps such as diagnosing problems, identifying skill areas, developing remedial programmes, and implementing improvement plans. Adds that improving teachers' content knowledge and learning innovation is key. The following are recommended strategies for secondary school teachers:

a. Build vocabulary through context and visuals. Teachers can use semantic mapping and thematic word group diagrams, as well as insert images or graphics to support the visualisation of word meanings. Panjaitan et al. (2021) found that vocabulary mastery is a major obstacle for secondary school students; therefore, teachers need to develop contextual vocabulary in stages.

b. Use active and structured reading methods. Select texts that are appropriate for secondary school students, implement pre-reading activities to predict content, and identify difficult words. During reading, ask students to mark unfamiliar words or constructions and discuss their meanings together. After reading, ask students to summarise in their own words or discuss in groups. Mirasol (2024) reports that combining motivation, genre awareness, and reading strategies effectively improves comprehension.

c. Integrate engaging media and enjoyable activities. Interactive media and motivating activities increase student interest and engagement. Digital media videos, applications, microlearning, and interactive reading programmes enable active and enjoyable learning (Ashari et al., 2023). Interactive digital reading programmes improve literacy and vocabulary retention while making learning more interesting

These strategies, if implemented, are expected to help ninth-grade students at SMP Islam Tunas Ilmu improve their English learning outcomes.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the literature analysis and research reviewed, the author concludes that difficulties in learning English in the ninth grade at SMP Islam Tunas Ilmu can be influenced by internal and external factors. Internal factors can include low motivation and interest in learning, unstable self-confidence, inappropriate learning styles, and cognitive factors. These include anxiety levels and initial speaking ability. Meanwhile, external factors can include inappropriate teaching methods and an unsupportive learning environment. Therefore, with this research, it is hoped that teachers and educators will adjust their learning strategies according to the needs of students, integrate interesting learning media, and use participatory methods.

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