

A DIAGNOSTIC ANALYSIS OF GRADE IX STUDENTS' VOCABULARY MASTERY IN NARRATIVE TEXTS AT SMP NEGERI 1 SIANTAR

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the vocabulary mastery of ninth-grade students in narrative texts at SMP Negeri 1 Siantar. Vocabulary plays a crucial role in supporting students' language skills; however, many learners still experience difficulties in using vocabulary appropriately in narrative contexts. This research employed a descriptive quantitative design involving 30 students of class IX-6. Data were collected through a 40-item multiple-choice vocabulary test covering four aspects: verb word class, noun meaning, adjective use, and word collocation. The results indicated that the students' mean score was 72.4, categorized as fair. Students performed best in noun meaning (76%), followed by adjective use (70%) and verb word class (68%), while word collocation showed the lowest achievement (65%). These findings suggest that students possess relatively adequate receptive vocabulary knowledge but face challenges in applying vocabulary contextually in narrative texts. The study contributes to EFL vocabulary research by providing a diagnostic profile of learners' vocabulary strengths and weaknesses in narrative text comprehension, which can inform more effective vocabulary instruction. Therefore, it is recommended that English teachers implement contextual and communicative vocabulary teaching strategies, such as storytelling and retelling activities, to enhance students' productive vocabulary use.

Introduction

Vocabulary plays a fundamental role in English language learning, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts such as Indonesia. It underpins the development of all language skills listening, speaking, reading, and writing and directly affects learners' ability to comprehend texts and express ideas accurately. Wilkins (1972) famously stated that "without grammar, very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed," emphasizing that vocabulary mastery is central to effective communication in a second or foreign language.

In Indonesian junior high schools, vocabulary instruction is embedded within the teaching of various text genres, including narrative texts, which constitute a core component of the English curriculum. Narrative texts aim to entertain readers and convey moral values through structured storylines involving characters, settings, and sequences of past events (Anderson & Anderson, 2003). Consequently, students are required to master vocabulary related to past actions, descriptions, and events, particularly verbs, nouns, adjectives, and common word combinations. Insufficient vocabulary mastery in these areas may hinder students' ability to comprehend narrative texts and to retell or construct stories coherently.

Despite prolonged exposure to English instruction, many Indonesian EFL learners continue to experience persistent vocabulary-related difficulties. Schmitt (2010) distinguishes vocabulary knowledge into receptive and productive dimensions, noting that learners often recognize words in reading or listening but struggle to use them appropriately in speaking or writing. This imbalance has been widely observed in EFL classrooms, where students demonstrate limited ability to apply vocabulary contextually, especially in extended texts such as narratives.

Previous studies have documented the impact of vocabulary limitations on students' language performance. Nation (2001) argued that vocabulary size strongly predicts reading comprehension and overall language proficiency. Laufer and Nation (1999) further found that inadequate vocabulary knowledge restricts learners' ability to infer meaning from context. In the Indonesian context, Siregar (2022) reported frequent lexical errors among junior high school students when interpreting narrative texts, particularly in verb forms and descriptive vocabulary. Similarly, Lestari and Ramadhan (2023) revealed that limited vocabulary range results in repetitive word use and weak sentence development in students' narrative writing. While these studies confirm that vocabulary mastery remains a significant challenge, they primarily focus on learning outcomes or instructional techniques rather than offering a detailed diagnosis of specific vocabulary weaknesses.

At SMP Negeri 1 Siantar, preliminary observations and informal discussions with English teachers revealed similar issues among ninth-grade students. Learners often struggle to identify correct verb forms, understand unfamiliar nouns, use adjectives appropriately, and apply natural word collocations in narrative texts. These problems suggest that students may possess partial or surface-level vocabulary knowledge, which limits their ability to use words accurately and naturally in context. As Richards and Renandya (2002) emphasized, effective vocabulary learning requires contextualized practice rather than mere memorization or translation.

Although a growing body of research has explored strategies to improve vocabulary mastery, relatively limited attention has been given to diagnostic studies that examine students' existing vocabulary competence in specific text genres, particularly narrative texts at the junior high school level. This indicates a clear research gap in terms of identifying learners' vocabulary strengths and weaknesses before instructional intervention.

Therefore, the present study aims to analyze the vocabulary mastery of ninth-grade students at SMP Negeri 1 Siantar in narrative texts, with particular attention to verb word class, noun meaning, adjective use, and word collocation. By providing a diagnostic overview of students' vocabulary performance, this study seeks to contribute to EFL vocabulary research and offer practical insights for teachers in designing more targeted and contextual vocabulary instruction.

Method

A. Research Design

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design with a diagnostic orientation. Descriptive quantitative research is used to describe existing conditions or phenomena as they occur naturally without manipulating variables (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2010). In line with this definition, the present study aimed to describe the current level of students' vocabulary mastery in narrative texts at the ninth grade of SMP Negeri 1 Siantar.

The descriptive quantitative approach was considered appropriate because the objective of the study was not to test hypotheses or determine causal relationships, but to obtain a systematic and factual picture of students' vocabulary performance. As Creswell (2012) explains, descriptive research focuses on identifying characteristics, patterns, and trends within a population through numerical data. Accordingly, students' vocabulary mastery was measured through test scores and analyzed quantitatively to identify areas of strength and difficulty.

The main variable of this research was students' vocabulary mastery in narrative texts. Vocabulary mastery refers to learners' knowledge of word meaning, form, and use, including the ability to recognize, understand, and apply vocabulary appropriately in context (Nation, 2001). In this study, vocabulary mastery was examined through four specific aspects commonly required in narrative texts: verb word class, noun meaning, adjective use, and word collocation. These aspects were selected because they represent core lexical elements in narrative comprehension and production and are frequently problematic for EFL learners.

This research adopted a diagnostic perspective, as the primary purpose was to identify students' existing vocabulary competence and pinpoint specific lexical difficulties rather than to improve vocabulary through instructional treatment. Brown (2001) notes that descriptive studies in language education can serve diagnostic functions by providing detailed information about learners' weaknesses that can inform future pedagogical decisions. Therefore, the findings of this study are intended to serve as diagnostic feedback for teachers in planning more targeted vocabulary instruction.

It should be acknowledged that this study involved a relatively small sample size, consisting of 30 students from one ninth-grade class. As a result, the findings may not be generalized to all ninth-grade students or to other schools with different learning contexts.

However, despite this limitation, the descriptive quantitative design remains valuable for providing an in-depth snapshot of students' vocabulary mastery within the specific research setting. The results should therefore be interpreted as context-specific findings that highlight common vocabulary challenges rather than as representative conclusions for a wider population.

Overall, the descriptive quantitative research design enabled the researcher to analyze students' vocabulary mastery objectively and systematically without manipulating instructional variables. By focusing on numerical data derived from a vocabulary test, this design provided a clear description of students' lexical strengths and weaknesses in narrative texts, particularly in relation to verb word class, noun meaning, adjective use, and word collocation.

B. Method

The participants of this study were 30 ninth-grade students of class IX-6 at SMP Negeri 1 Siantar in the 2025/2026 academic year. This class was selected because it represents a regular class with varying levels of English proficiency, reflecting the typical characteristics of EFL learners at the junior high school level.

The sampling technique used in this study was purposive sampling, as the selected class was considered suitable for achieving the research objectives, particularly in diagnosing students' vocabulary mastery in narrative texts. According to Hidayat and Sari (2024), purposive sampling allows researchers to select participants based on specific characteristics relevant to the study, enabling a more focused and meaningful analysis. This section explains the procedures used in conducting the research, including the research design, participants, research instrument, data collection, and data analysis. The purpose of this section is to describe how the study was systematically carried out to ensure validity and reliability which is to analyze the students' vocabulary mastery in narrative text at IX Grade of SMP Negeri 1 Siantar.

C. Research Instrument

The primary instrument used in this study was a vocabulary test designed to measure students' vocabulary mastery in narrative texts. The test consisted of 40 multiple-choice items, with four options for each item. The items were constructed to assess students' understanding and use of vocabulary commonly found in narrative texts at the ninth-grade level.

The vocabulary test focused on four aspects of vocabulary mastery: verb word class, noun meaning, adjective use, and word collocation. These aspects were selected based on their relevance to narrative text comprehension and production, as well as their alignment with established theories of vocabulary knowledge (Nation, 2001; Schmitt, 2010). The test items were adapted from the ninth-grade English textbook used at SMP Negeri 1 Siantar and were aligned with the applicable curriculum.

1. Test Blueprint

To ensure clarity and methodological rigor, a test blueprint was developed to demonstrate the alignment between vocabulary aspects, measurement indicators, and the number of test items. The distribution of test items is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Vocabulary Test Blueprint

Vocabulary Aspect	Measurement Indicators	Item Numbers	Number of Items	Item Format
Verb Word Class	Identifying and using correct verb forms in narrative sentences (simple past tense)	1–10	10	Multiple choice
Noun Meaning	Recognizing the meaning of nouns used in narrative texts	11–20	10	Multiple choice
Adjective Use	Selecting appropriate adjectives to describe characters or settings	21–30	10	Multiple choice
Word Collocation	Identifying natural word combinations in narrative contexts	31–40	10	Multiple choice
Total			40	

This blueprint demonstrates that each vocabulary aspect was measured evenly to provide a balanced assessment of students’ vocabulary mastery in narrative texts.

2. Validity and Reliability of the Instrument

Content validity was established through expert judgment. The test items were reviewed by English teacher, who evaluated the relevance, clarity, and appropriateness of each item in relation to the research objectives and the students’ proficiency level. Revisions were made based on their feedback before the test was administered.

Construct validity was addressed by aligning the test indicators with theoretical frameworks of vocabulary mastery. According to Nation (2001), vocabulary knowledge involves understanding word meaning, form, and use, while Schmitt (2010) emphasizes the distinction between receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge. In this study, noun meaning and verb word class primarily measured students’ receptive vocabulary knowledge, whereas adjective use and word collocation assessed students’ ability to apply vocabulary appropriately in context. This theoretical mapping supports the construct

validity of the instrument, as the test items reflect key dimensions of vocabulary mastery relevant to narrative texts.

Results and Discussion

The data obtained from the students' vocabulary test were analyzed using a descriptive quantitative approach to describe students' overall vocabulary mastery and their performance in specific vocabulary aspects. Based on the analysis of 30 students in class IX-6, the total score achieved was 2,172, with a mean score of 72.4. According to the classification criteria, this result falls into the fair category, indicating that students demonstrated a moderate level of vocabulary mastery in narrative texts.

This finding suggests that while students generally possess basic vocabulary knowledge, their mastery has not yet reached an optimal level for effective comprehension and production of narrative texts. This result supports Nation's (2001) assertion that vocabulary knowledge develops gradually and that learners often require a substantial lexical repertoire to process texts confidently. The distribution of scores also indicates variation in students' vocabulary competence, reflecting differences in exposure, learning strategies, and individual language aptitude.

Further analysis revealed that students performed differently across the four assessed vocabulary aspects. The highest achievement was found in noun meaning, with an average percentage of 76%. This indicates that students were relatively successful in recognizing and understanding nouns commonly used in narrative texts. This finding aligns with Schmitt's (2010) view that receptive vocabulary knowledge—such as recognizing word meanings—is typically acquired earlier and more easily than productive vocabulary knowledge. Nouns in narrative texts often represent concrete entities such as people, places, and objects, making them easier for learners to recall and comprehend.

The second-highest performance was observed in adjective use (70%). Although this result shows a reasonable level of understanding, students still experienced difficulties in selecting adjectives that accurately matched the context or emotional tone of the narrative. This finding is consistent with Lestari and Ramadhan (2023), who reported that EFL learners often rely on limited descriptive vocabulary, leading to repetitive or inappropriate adjective use in narrative writing. The moderate performance in this aspect suggests that students possess basic descriptive vocabulary but lack depth in expressive language use.

In contrast, students showed lower achievement in verb word class (68%), particularly in identifying and using correct verb forms in the simple past tense. This difficulty may be attributed to the complexity of English verb morphology, especially irregular verbs, which often differ significantly from learners' first language structures. Siregar (2022) similarly found that Indonesian junior high school students frequently made errors in verb forms when interpreting narrative texts. This result highlights that grammatical knowledge and vocabulary knowledge are closely interconnected, particularly in narrative contexts where verbs play a central role in conveying sequences of events.

The lowest performance was found in word collocation (65%), indicating that students struggled to combine words naturally in narrative sentences. This finding supports Nation's (2001) argument that collocational knowledge represents a deeper level of vocabulary mastery that is typically acquired later in the learning process. Students' difficulty with collocations suggests limited exposure to authentic language use and overreliance on word-by-word translation strategies. As Richards and Renandya (2002) note, such limitations often result from vocabulary instruction that emphasizes memorization rather than contextualized practice.

Taken together, these findings indicate a clear imbalance between students' receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge. While students were relatively proficient in recognizing word meanings, particularly nouns, they encountered greater challenges in using vocabulary accurately and naturally in context, especially in relation to verbs and collocations. This pattern reinforces Schmitt's (2010) distinction between receptive and productive vocabulary mastery and highlights the need for instructional approaches that move beyond recognition toward meaningful use.

The novelty of this study lies in its diagnostic focus, as it does not merely evaluate students' vocabulary achievement but identifies specific lexical areas that require pedagogical attention within the narrative text genre. By mapping students' strengths and weaknesses across four vocabulary aspects, this study provides empirical evidence that can inform more targeted vocabulary instruction in Indonesian EFL classrooms. These findings suggest that English teachers should prioritize contextual and communicative vocabulary activities, such as storytelling, retelling, and collocation-based exercises, to help students develop deeper and more functional vocabulary knowledge.

In conclusion, the results demonstrate that ninth-grade students at SMP Negeri 1 Siantar possess a moderate level of vocabulary mastery in narrative texts, with notable difficulties in verb usage and word collocation. By linking empirical findings with established vocabulary theories and previous studies, this research contributes to a clearer understanding of vocabulary challenges faced by Indonesian EFL learners and offers practical implications for improving vocabulary instruction in narrative-based learning.

For example, a student who answered 8 out of 10 items correctly received a score of 80%. The obtained scores were then converted into percentage categories according to Hidayat and Sari (2024), as shown below.

Tabel 1. Students' Vocabulary Mastery Distribution

Score Range	Category	Frequency (F)	Percentage (P%)
85 – 100	Very Good	4	13.33%
75 – 84	Good	8	26.67%
65 – 74	Fair	9	30.00%
55 – 64	Poor	6	20.00%

Score Range	Category	Frequency (F)	Percentage (P%)
Below 55	Very Poor	3	10.00%
Total	—	30	100%

After applying the formula to the data collected from 30 students in class IX-6, the researcher obtained the results summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Students' Vocabulary Mastery Scores in Narrative Text (Class IX-6)

No	Students' Initials	Number of Correct Answers	Score (%)	Category
1	A.R	35	87.5	Very Good
2	B.S	33	82.5	Good
3	C.N	32	80	Good
4	D.H	28	70	Fair
5	E.M	25	62.5	Poor
6	F.L	29	72.5	Fair
7	G.T	36	90	Very Good
8	H.J	31	77.5	Good
9	I.S	30	75	Good
10	J.K	26	65	Fair
11	K.P	27	67.5	Fair
12	L.W	22	55	Poor
13	M.R	19	47.5	Very Poor
14	N.L	21	52.5	Very Poor
15	O.A	34	85	Very Good
16	P.D	28	70	Fair
17	Q.V	31	77.5	Good
18	R.B	24	60	Poor
19	S.T	33	82.5	Good
20	T.K	29	72.5	Fair
21	U.Z	27	67.5	Fair
22	V.G	23	57.5	Poor
23	W.A	26	65	Fair
24	X.M	32	80	Good

No	Students' Initials	Number of Correct Answers	Score (%)	Category
25	Y.H	34	85	Very Good
26	Z.S	20	50	Very Poor
27	A.P	24	60	Poor
28	B.F	28	70	Fair
29	C.T	31	77.5	Good
30	D.J	33	82.5	Good

Based on Table 2, the total score of all students was 2,172, with a mean score of 72.4, which falls into the **fair** category. This result indicates that the ninth-grade students of class IX-6 at SMP Negeri 1 Siantar generally demonstrated a moderate level of vocabulary mastery in narrative texts. From a theoretical perspective, this level of achievement suggests that students possess basic receptive vocabulary knowledge but have not yet developed sufficient depth of vocabulary use. According to Nation (2001) and Schmitt (2010), vocabulary mastery involves not only recognizing word meanings but also understanding word forms, grammatical functions, and appropriate usage in context. The fair category achieved by the students reflects a common pattern in EFL learning, where learners can identify familiar words but experience difficulty applying them accurately in sentences, particularly in relation to verb forms and word collocation.

Following Creswell and Creswell (2021), the data were further analyzed descriptively by grouping the results according to specific vocabulary aspects, namely **verb word class, noun meaning, adjective use, and word collocation**. This diagnostic approach, adapted from Hidayat and Sari (2024), was employed to identify which vocabulary components students had already mastered and which aspects still required improvement. Such an analysis is essential in EFL contexts, as it allows researchers and teachers to move beyond overall scores and examine underlying lexical strengths and weaknesses that influence students' comprehension and production of narrative texts.

Conclusion

This study concludes that ninth-grade students at SMP Negeri 1 Siantar demonstrate a fair level of vocabulary mastery in narrative texts, with a mean score of 72.4. While students are generally able to recognize and understand basic vocabulary items, their ability to use vocabulary accurately and naturally in context remains limited. This finding indicates an imbalance between students' receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge in narrative text comprehension and production.

The analysis of specific vocabulary aspects shows that students achieved the highest performance in noun meaning, followed by adjective use and verb word class, whereas word collocation emerged as the most challenging aspect. These results suggest that students tend to acquire concrete and high-frequency vocabulary more easily, while deeper lexical knowledge such as verb morphology and collocational use requires greater exposure and contextualized practice.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings support and extend existing theories of vocabulary mastery proposed by Nation (2001) and Schmitt (2010), which emphasize that vocabulary knowledge encompasses not only meaning recognition but also form, use, and collocation. The lower achievement in productive aspects of vocabulary, particularly verb usage and collocation, reinforces the view that productive vocabulary develops more slowly than receptive vocabulary in EFL contexts. Moreover, the results highlight the importance of contextual input and meaningful language use, as emphasized by Wilkins (1972), in enabling learners to communicate effectively beyond isolated word knowledge.

The main scholarly contribution of this study lies in its diagnostic focus, as it provides a detailed profile of students' vocabulary strengths and weaknesses within the narrative text genre at the junior high school level. Rather than examining vocabulary improvement through instructional intervention, this study offers empirical evidence that can inform more targeted and needs-based vocabulary instruction in Indonesian EFL classrooms. The findings suggest that vocabulary teaching should move beyond memorization and translation toward communicative and contextual approaches, such as storytelling, retelling activities, and collocation-based exercises.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. The relatively small sample size and the focus on a single class limit the generalizability of the findings to broader student populations. In addition, the use of multiple-choice tests may not fully capture students' productive vocabulary ability in authentic language use. Therefore, the results should be interpreted within the specific context of the study.

Future research is recommended to involve larger and more diverse samples across different schools and regions, as well as to employ mixed-method approaches that include writing tasks, interviews, or classroom observations. Such studies could provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' vocabulary mastery and explore the relationship between vocabulary knowledge and narrative text production in greater depth.

In conclusion, this study underscores the critical role of vocabulary mastery in narrative text learning and highlights the need for diagnostic-based vocabulary instruction in EFL classrooms. By addressing students' specific lexical difficulties, teachers and researchers can better support learners in developing the depth and flexibility of vocabulary knowledge required for effective communication in English.

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