



Seventh-Grade Students' Difficulties in Learning English Verbs

in the "My School Activities" Material

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Abstract

Previous studies on junior high school students' vocabulary learning have often examined vocabulary difficulties in general or discussed meaning, pronunciation, and usage separately. This descriptive qualitative study addresses that gap by investigating seventh-grade students' difficulties in learning English verbs in the My School Activities material at SMP Negeri 1 Bulango Timur through an integrated analysis of meaning, pronunciation, and contextual usage. Ten students were selected because they had studied the target material and represented varied English learning abilities. Data were collected through structured direct observation activities, namely verb-meaning matching, read-aloud pronunciation, and fill-in-the-blank sentence completion, supported by semi-structured interviews and documentation of the teacher's module and the English for Nusantara textbook. The data were analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's interactive model through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The findings show that all participants experienced difficulties across the three aspects. Students confused verb meanings and forgot previously learned words, pronounced verbs by relying on Indonesian spelling patterns, and selected verbs that did not fit sentence contexts. The study contributes a contextual account of how meaning, pronunciation, and usage difficulties are interconnected in verb learning and suggests that teachers should combine vocabulary review, read-aloud practice, and sentence-based activities.

1. Introduction

English language learning requires the integration of vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and language skills. These components support learners' ability to understand messages and express ideas in spoken and written communication. Brown (2007, as cited in Lutfiyah et al., 2022) explains that language learning is complex because learners need linguistic and communicative abilities at the same time. In junior high school English learning, this integration becomes important because students are still developing the basic resources needed to communicate in English.

Vocabulary is one of the most important resources in English learning because students cannot understand texts or produce meaningful utterances without sufficient word knowledge. Nation (2001, as cited in Lutfiyah et al., 2022) states that vocabulary mastery involves meaning, form, and use in context. In this study, form is operationalized as pronunciation because pronunciation is the most observable form-related difficulty in classroom interaction. Recent studies show that limited vocabulary continues to be a major obstacle for junior high school students (Afidah & Machfudi, 2022; Rosyada-AS & Apoko, 2023). However, vocabulary difficulties should not be treated as one general problem because different word classes create different learning demands.

Verbs deserve specific attention because they express actions, states, and events, and they form the core of sentence meaning. Azar (1999) argues that verbs are central to sentence structure because they determine how a statement is formed. Errors in verb choice or verb placement may therefore affect both meaning and sentence clarity. For beginner EFL learners, verbs are not only words to memorize; they also require students to connect meaning, pronunciation, and grammatical use in simple communicative contexts.

Previous studies have reported that students experience difficulties in understanding vocabulary meanings, pronouncing English words, and using vocabulary in context (Rohmatillah, 2020; Salam & Nurnisa, 2021; Susanto, 2021). Other studies also show that pronunciation problems are influenced by differences between Indonesian and English sound systems, limited exposure, and lack of regular practice (Hidayatullah et al., 2024).

Meanwhile, studies on grammar learning show that students often struggle to use verbs appropriately in sentence construction (Kuncoro & Fitriah, 2025; Silaban & Manurung, 2025). These studies are relevant, but most of them examine vocabulary difficulty broadly or discuss meaning, pronunciation, and usage as separate problems. This creates a gap for a focused study that investigates English verbs through the three aspects simultaneously.

The classroom context of this study is Chapter 4, My School Activities, in the Grade VII English for Nusantara textbook (Badan Standar, Kurikulum, dan Asesmen Pendidikan, 2022). The material introduces daily school-related verbs such as study, ask, take, join, have, answer, make, watch, read, open, do, practice, write, close, borrow, submit, listen, review, use, and go. These verbs appear in class

schedules, online learning tips, and study habit texts. Although the verbs are closely related to students' daily school activities, preliminary information from the English teacher indicated that students still struggled to remember their meanings, pronounce them accurately, and use them in simple sentence contexts.

Based on this problem, the research question of this study is: What difficulties do seventh-grade students of SMP Negeri 1 Bulango Timur experience in learning English verbs in the My School Activities material? The objective of the study is to identify and describe students' difficulties in learning English verbs, particularly in terms of meaning, pronunciation, and usage in simple sentences. The novelty of this study lies in its integrated analysis of verb learning difficulties within one specific textbook material.

Furthermore, unlike previous studies that examined vocabulary difficulties in general or focused on only one aspect of language learning, this study specifically investigates English verbs within the My School Activities material and explores meaning, pronunciation, and usage difficulties simultaneously in a junior high school EFL context. Rather than viewing vocabulary difficulty as a single broad issue, this study explains how meaning, pronunciation, and usage difficulties appear together and influence students' ability to learn English verbs.

2. Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach. This design was selected because the study aimed to describe students' actual difficulties in learning English verbs rather than to test hypotheses or measure causal relationships. Creswell (2012) explains that qualitative research is appropriate for exploring participants' experiences and the meanings they assign to educational problems. The structured observation activities in this study produced written and oral responses, but these responses were used as qualitative evidence to identify patterns of difficulty. Therefore, the study remained qualitative and did not use the activities as statistical tests in a mixed-methods design.

The research was conducted at SMP Negeri 1 Bulango Timur, Bone Bolango Regency, Gorontalo Province. The participants were ten seventh-grade students who had studied the My School Activities material. They were selected through based on four criteria: they were seventh-grade students, they had studied the target material, they were willing to participate, and they represented varied English learning abilities based on teacher information and observable classroom performance.

The small subject was appropriate for a descriptive qualitative study because the purpose was to obtain in-depth information from participants with relevant learning experiences, not to generalize statistically to all junior high school students.

Data were collected through direct observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Direct observation consisted of three structured activities.

First, a verb-meaning matching activity was used to identify students' difficulties in recognizing verb meanings.

Second, a read-aloud activity was used to observe pronunciation difficulties, including vowel problems, consonant problems, unclear pronunciation, and first-language interference.

Third, a fill-in-the-blank activity was used to identify students' difficulties in selecting verbs that matched sentence contexts. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in Indonesian so that students could explain their difficulties more comfortably. Documentation included the teacher's English module and the English for Nusantara textbook, which confirmed that the selected verbs were taken from the actual learning material.

The instruments were developed based on the conceptual framework of vocabulary knowledge, pronunciation, and verb usage. They were reviewed by the English teacher and the research supervisor to ensure that the verbs, instructions, and interview questions were relevant to the research objectives, students' proficiency level, and the My School Activities material. The interview guide covered three main areas: difficulties in understanding verb meanings, difficulties in pronouncing English verbs, and difficulties in using verbs in simple sentences. Follow-up questions were used to explore the causes of students' difficulties, such as vocabulary retention, pronunciation practice, confidence, grammar knowledge, and learning habits.

The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014), which consists of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. During data reduction, observation results and interview responses were categorized into three codes: M for difficulties in understanding verb meanings, P for difficulties in pronouncing English verbs, and U for difficulties in using verbs in sentences.

Frequency patterns from the observation activities and interviews were used descriptively to identify recurring difficulties, while students' explanations were used to interpret the causes of those difficulties. The data display was presented in narrative descriptions and tables. Conclusions were verified by comparing evidence from observation, interviews, and documentation.

Trustworthiness was maintained through methodological triangulation and the qualitative criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was supported by comparing the three data sources. Transferability was supported by describing the setting, participants, material, instruments, and procedures clearly. Dependability was supported by documenting the stages of participant selection, instrument development, data collection, and analysis.

Confirmability was supported by grounding the interpretation in students' actual responses and observation results. Ethical considerations were also applied. School permission was obtained before data collection, students participated voluntarily, and participants' names were replaced with codes from S1 to S10 to protect confidentiality.

3. Result

The findings show that the participants experienced difficulties in all three aspects of English verb learning: meaning, pronunciation, and usage. Table 1 summarizes the dominant patterns, examples, and interpreted causes found through observation, interviews, and documentation.

Table 1. Summary of Students' Difficulties in Learning English Verbs

Aspect	Dominant pattern	Examples from data	Interpreted causes
Meaning	10/10 students reported meaning difficulty. Observation: answer, watch, have, ask, make, and read were often wrong. Interview: review and submit were cited by 4 students each.	answer -> have/read/take; watch -> take/make/have/ask/answer.	Large vocabulary load, forgetting, limited review, and unequal mastery.
Pronunciation	10/10 students reported pronunciation difficulty. Mispronounced verbs: write (10), read (9), use (8), ask (7), and take (7).	write -> wirite/wirr/writee; ask -> aks/A-S-K/Esk; listen -> lissten/lis'en.	Spelling-pronunciation gap, Indonesian reading patterns, limited exposure, and limited oral practice.
Usage	10/10 students reported usage difficulty. Misused verbs: review/submit	submit for borrow; review for go; use for submit.	Sentence construction difficulty, verb placement confusion,

(8 each),
borrow/listen (7
each), and
do/write (6
each).

limited
grammar
knowledge, and
lack of
contextual
practice.

Students' Difficulties in Understanding Verb Meanings

The direct observation through the matching activity showed that students still had difficulty associating English verbs with their correct Indonesian meanings. The verbs answer, watch, have, ask, make, and read appeared as the most problematic items in the observation data. For instance, answer was identified as have by S1 and S2, as read by S3, S8, and S9, and as take by S10. Similarly, watch was identified as take by S1, make by S3, S4, and S8, have by S5, ask by S6, and answer by S7 and S10. These errors show that several students recognized the verb forms but could not consistently connect them with the correct meanings.

The observation also showed variation among participants. S1 and S5 made fewer errors than most participants, which suggests relatively better immediate recognition of the verbs tested. However, several other students made errors across multiple verbs, indicating that vocabulary mastery differed among students who had studied the same material. This variation supports the need to look beyond whether the material had been taught and examine how strongly the verbs were retained by individual students.

The interview data strengthened the observation findings. All ten participants stated that they had difficulty understanding English verb meanings. The verbs review and submit were the most frequently mentioned as difficult, each cited by four participants. Borrow, watch, and have were each mentioned by three participants, while answer was mentioned by two participants. Students explained that the number of vocabulary items made it difficult to remember verb meanings and that they often forgot words after learning them.

S1 stated, "Because I lack mastery of the meanings of English vocabulary, especially verbs, since I think there are too many words to memorize."

S3 stated, "In my opinion, there are too many words, especially verbs, so I often forget them."

These responses indicate that meaning difficulty was not only a matter of encountering unfamiliar words. It was also related to weak retention of words that had already been introduced. Documentation from the teacher's module and the textbook confirmed that the difficult verbs were part of the My School Activities material. Therefore, the problem was not a mismatch between the research instrument and the learning material, but students' limited ability to retain and retrieve verb meanings.

Students' Difficulties in Pronouncing English Verbs

The read-aloud activity showed that pronunciation was a major difficulty for the participants. The verb *write* was mispronounced by all ten students. *Read* was mispronounced by nine participants, *use* by eight participants, and *ask* and *take* by seven participants each. In contrast, *join* and *answer* were mispronounced by only one participant each, while *go* was pronounced correctly by all participants.

This pattern suggests that students pronounced familiar and transparent verbs more accurately, but struggled with verbs whose written forms differed from their pronunciation.

The errors showed a strong reliance on spelling. The verb *write* was pronounced as *wirite*, *wirr*, *writ*, *writee*, and *writen*. *Ask* was pronounced as *aks*, *A-S-K*, *as*, *aske*, *Esk*, and *Eks*. *Take* was pronounced as *taik*, *tak*, *tek*, *teyikk*, and *takk*. *Listen* was pronounced as *listten*, *lissten*, *linsen*, and *lis'en*, while *use* was pronounced as *usee*, *yusee*, *uss*, *ass*, and *us*. These patterns indicate that students often transferred Indonesian reading habits to English words.

Participant comparison also revealed differences in pronunciation performance. S1, S2, and S10 made the highest number of pronunciation errors, with seven errors each in the read-aloud activity. S8 performed better than the other participants, making three pronunciation errors. Nevertheless, even the stronger participant still produced errors, which indicates that pronunciation difficulty was not limited to lower-performing students.

The interview data confirmed the observation pattern. All participants stated that they had difficulty pronouncing English verbs. The verb *write* was the most frequently mentioned difficult word, cited by eight participants. *Ask*, *use*, and *listen* were each mentioned by four participants, and *take* was mentioned by three participants. The students mostly attributed these difficulties to the difference between English spelling and pronunciation.

S3 explained, "Because what is written is different from how it is pronounced."

S4 stated, "Because the pronunciation is different from that in Indonesian."

S1 added, "Because I lack practice and also feel shy when speaking English."

These excerpts show that pronunciation difficulties were influenced by both linguistic and affective factors. Students were confused by English sound-spelling differences, but they also had limited speaking practice and some felt shy when pronouncing English words. Documentation confirmed that the verbs in the read-aloud activity came from the same learning material students had studied.

Students' Difficulties in Using Verbs in Sentences

The fill-in-the-blank activity showed that students had difficulty selecting verbs that matched sentence contexts. The most frequent errors did not involve blank answers. Instead, students chose English verbs that were available in the word box but did not fit the intended meaning of the sentence. *Review* and *submit* were the two most frequently misused verbs, each used incorrectly by eight

participants. Borrow and listen were misused by seven participants each, while do and write were misused by six participants each.

Several responses showed that students interchanged the functions of different verbs. Some participants used submit in a sentence where borrow should have been used, review where go was expected, and use where submit was the appropriate answer. These errors indicate that students had not fully understood how each verb functioned in a specific sentence context, even when the verb form itself was familiar to them.

The interview data supported this finding. All ten participants reported difficulty using English verbs in sentences. Seven participants stated that they were confused about how to begin constructing an English sentence. Five participants reported difficulty determining the correct position of verbs, and four participants connected their difficulty to limited grammar knowledge. These responses show that usage difficulty was not only a vocabulary problem but also a sentence construction problem.

S2 explained, "I am confused about where to start a sentence, and I still cannot place the verb in the sentence."

S7 stated, "I have trouble starting to form a sentence because I am afraid of making grammar mistakes."

Participant performance again varied. S8 performed better than other participants in the sentence-completion activity, making only two errors. However, most participants still struggled when they had to use verbs productively in sentence contexts. This suggests that recognizing a verb and using it appropriately are different levels of mastery. Documentation from the teacher's module and textbook confirmed that the usage activity was aligned with the My School Activities material.

4. Discussion

Student Difficulties in Understanding Verb Meanings

The findings show that students' difficulty in understanding verb meanings was closely related to limited vocabulary retention. Nation (2001, as cited in Lutfiyah et al., 2022) explains that vocabulary knowledge includes meaning, form, and use. The present study shows that meaning knowledge was not stable among many participants because they often forgot verbs or confused one verb with another. This finding is consistent with Rohmatillah (2020), Salam and Nurnisa (2021), and Rosyada-AS and Apoko (2023), who found that students often struggle to remember vocabulary meanings and identify words accurately.

A more specific insight from this study is that the verbs were not necessarily difficult because they were completely new. Many of them had already appeared in the My School Activities material. The problem was that students had not consolidated those verbs into long-term memory. This explains why some participants could recognize certain verbs during classroom exposure but failed to identify them accurately during observation. Therefore, vocabulary teaching

should not stop at introducing word meanings. Since the verbs investigated in this study had already been taught through the My School Activities material, teachers should provide repeated review and opportunities to recycle these verbs in different contexts. Such practices may help students retain verb meanings more effectively and reduce forgetting over time.

Student's Difficulties in Pronouncing English Verbs

The pronunciation findings show that students relied heavily on written forms when reading English verbs aloud. Kelly 2000, explains that pronunciation difficulties often arise because learners face differences between the sound system of their first language and that of English. The students' pronunciations of write as wirite, writee, or writen illustrate this problem clearly. The silent letter in write and the irregular relationship between English spelling and pronunciation made the word difficult for all participants.

The findings also reflect first-language interference. Indonesian spelling is relatively transparent, while English spelling-pronunciation relationships are less predictable. As a result, students tended to apply Indonesian reading patterns to English verbs. This supports Hidayatullah et al. (2024), who reported that Indonesian EFL learners experience pronunciation problems because some English sounds and sound combinations are unfamiliar. However, the present study also suggests an alternative explanation: pronunciation errors were reinforced by limited practice and low confidence. Students who rarely heard or produced English words had fewer chances to correct spelling-based pronunciation habits.

Student's Difficulties Usage Verbs in Sentences

The usage findings show that students' verb knowledge was often receptive rather than productive. Some students could identify a verb form but still failed to use the verb appropriately in a sentence. Azar 1999 states that verbs are central to sentence structure because they determine how ideas are expressed. In this study, students' errors in choosing verbs for sentence contexts show that knowing a verb meaning does not automatically lead to accurate use.

This pattern is consistent with Silaban and Manurung (2025), who found that students struggle with using verbs according to sentence context and grammatical rules. It also supports Kuncoro and Fitriah (2025), who emphasize that grammatical understanding affects students' ability to construct meaningful English sentences. The present study adds that usage difficulty was intensified by uncertainty about sentence beginnings, verb placement, and subject-verb relationships. Therefore, verb teaching needs to move from isolated vocabulary lists to guided sentence practice, sentence frames, short dialogues, and contextual tasks.

Interrelationship Among Meaning, Pronunciation, and Usage

The three difficulty areas were interconnected. Weak meaning retention limited students' ability to choose appropriate verbs in sentence contexts. Pronunciation difficulty also affected word recognition because students sometimes knew the written form but could not confidently connect it with the spoken form. Usage difficulty represented the highest level of challenge because it required students to combine meaning, form, grammar, and context at the same time. This interrelationship explains why verb learning should not be separated into isolated activities.

Pedagogically, the study contributes a practical framework for vocabulary teaching at the junior high school level. Teachers should integrate three activities in one learning cycle: meaning review, pronunciation practice, and contextual sentence use. For example, teachers can begin with quick matching or retrieval activities, continue with read-aloud and choral repetition to address sound-spelling differences, and end with sentence-completion, sentence-building, or guided dialogue tasks. This integrated routine can help students connect what a verb means, how it is pronounced, and how it functions in communication.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that seventh-grade students at SMP Negeri 1 Bulango Timur experienced difficulties in learning English verbs in the My School Activities material across three interconnected aspects: meaning, pronunciation, and usage. In terms of meaning, all participants reported difficulty understanding verb meanings, especially because they had to learn many vocabulary items, often forgot previously learned words, and had limited mastery of certain verbs. In pronunciation, all participants experienced difficulty, with write, read, use, ask, and take appearing as the most problematic verbs.

These difficulties were mainly influenced by English spelling-pronunciation differences, Indonesian reading patterns, limited exposure, and lack of regular pronunciation practice. In usage, all participants had difficulty selecting verbs that matched sentence contexts, constructing sentences, placing verbs correctly, and applying basic grammar knowledge.

The study also shows that meaning, pronunciation, and usage difficulties influenced one another. Limited meaning retention made verb selection difficult, pronunciation uncertainty weakened confidence in oral use, and limited grammatical knowledge made it difficult for students to apply verbs in sentence contexts. The findings suggest that English teachers should teach verbs through integrated activities that combine repeated vocabulary review, read-aloud practice, pronunciation feedback, sentence-based exercises, and contextual use.

The study is limited to ten students in one school and selected action verbs from one textbook chapter, so the findings should be interpreted within this context. Future studies may involve more participants, different schools, broader verb

categories, or instructional interventions to examine how students' verb learning difficulties can be reduced.

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