

TEACHERS' USE OF DICTIONARY-BASED LEARNING IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS

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Abstract: This study aims to analyze the use of dictionary-based learning in teaching English to young learners at a public elementary school. This research employed a qualitative research design. The instruments used in this study were classroom observation and interview. The data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with an English teacher to identify how dictionary-based learning was implemented during the teaching and learning process. Based on the data analysis, the results showed that dictionary-based learning was consistently used as a dominant strategy in teaching vocabulary. The teacher required students to bring dictionaries and encouraged them to find word meanings independently before receiving explanations from the teacher. This strategy helped students increase vocabulary awareness, develop learning responsibility, and become more independent learners. However, some students experienced difficulties in understanding dictionary meanings, which required teacher guidance and scaffolding. The findings indicate that dictionary-based learning can enhance students' engagement and understanding in English lessons. This strategy is important for teachers because it helps create a more effective, active, and meaningful learning environment for young learners. In conclusion, the implementation of dictionary-based learning makes the English learning process more engaging, meaningful, and motivating when supported by appropriate teacher assistance.

Keywords: Dictionary-Based Learning, Teaching Strategies, English Teaching, Young Learners

1. INTRODUCTION

English has become an essential subject introduced at the primary school level in Indonesia to equip students with basic language skills for future academic and global communication needs. For young learners, vocabulary plays a fundamental role in language acquisition, as it supports the development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Therefore, effective vocabulary teaching strategies are crucial in helping young learners understand and use English meaningfully.

In English classrooms for young learners, teachers are required to apply strategies that match students' cognitive development, learning characteristics, and classroom conditions. Various strategies such as demonstration, drilling, questioning, and games are commonly used to introduce new vocabulary. One strategy that specifically supports vocabulary learning is dictionary-based learning, which encourages students to actively search for word meanings rather than relying solely on direct explanations from the teacher.

Although dictionary-based learning has been widely discussed as a strategy to promote learner autonomy and vocabulary development, most studies have focused on secondary or tertiary learners, as well as on private or specialized school settings. Limited attention has been given to how dictionary-based learning is implemented in

public elementary school English classrooms, particularly in the Indonesian context. As a result, there is a lack of empirical evidence describing how this strategy is practiced by teachers and how it supports young learners' vocabulary learning in real classroom situations.

Based on this gap, this study aims to explore the use of dictionary-based learning by an English teacher in teaching English to young learners at a public elementary school. Specifically, this study focuses on how dictionary-based learning is implemented during classroom activities and its role in supporting students' vocabulary learning. By addressing this gap, the study is expected to contribute to a better understanding of effective vocabulary teaching strategies for young learners in public primary school contexts.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Teaching English for Young Learners

Teaching English to young learners requires strategies that consider learners' developmental stages, interests, and learning styles. According to Brown (2000), young learners learn best through concrete experiences, repetition, and meaningful interaction. Harmer (2007) emphasizes that teachers should employ engaging and student-centered strategies to maintain motivation and participation in the classroom.

2.2. Teaching Strategies in English Classrooms

Teaching strategies refer to planned actions used by teachers to achieve learning objectives. Richards and Farrell (2005) state that effective teaching strategies should be adaptable, interactive, and responsive to students' needs. In primary English classrooms, strategies such as demonstration, questioning, drilling, and games are commonly used to support students' understanding and engagement.

2.3. Dictionary-Based Learning

Dictionary-based learning is a strategy that encourages learners to use dictionaries as learning tools to discover word meanings independently. Nation (2001) and Schmitt (2008) argue that dictionary use supports vocabulary acquisition by promoting learner autonomy and deeper word knowledge. By engaging students in searching for meanings, dictionary-based learning helps them develop responsibility and active learning habits. However, young learners may still require guidance to ensure correct interpretation of word meanings.

3. METHODS

This study uses a descriptive qualitative research design. The participant was one English teacher who taught fourth-grade students at a public elementary school in Makassar, Indonesia. The teacher was selected purposively due to her experience in teaching English to young learners. Data were collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. Observations were conducted to identify how dictionary-based learning was implemented during English lessons, while interviews were used to explore the teacher's perspectives on the use of dictionaries in teaching vocabulary. The data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's (2020)

interactive model, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Observation Results

Based on classroom observations, dictionary-based learning was consistently implemented during English lessons as a dominant strategy to support vocabulary learning. The teacher required students to bring dictionaries to class and actively use them during learning activities. When new vocabulary was introduced, students were instructed to look up the meanings independently before the teacher provided further explanations.

During the observation, students were frequently seen opening their dictionaries to find word meanings, checking spellings, and confirming pronunciation. Some students also discussed vocabulary meanings with their peers. This practice encouraged active participation and reduced students' dependence on direct teacher explanations. The use of dictionaries helped students become more engaged in vocabulary-focused tasks and supported their responsibility for learning.

However, the observation also showed that some students experienced difficulties in selecting appropriate meanings from the dictionary, especially when words had multiple definitions. In such situations, the teacher guided students by giving contextual clues and simplified explanations to ensure correct understanding.

4.2. Interview Findings

The interview results provided deeper insight into the teacher's teaching strategies and confirmed several practices observed during classroom instruction.

The teacher emphasized dictionary-based learning as a compulsory strategy in teaching vocabulary. Students were required to bring dictionaries to every English lesson, and consequences were applied if they failed to do so. As stated by the teacher:

"Pastinya bawa kamus karena kalau tidak bawa kamus ada hukumannya, konsekuensinya karena dari awal pembelajaran sudah perjanjian kalau tidak bawa kamus ada konsekuensinya."

"Of course, they must bring a dictionary because if they do not, there will be consequences, since from the beginning there has been an agreement that bringing a dictionary is mandatory." (Teachers' Interview, 15 September 2025).

This requirement aimed to encourage students to become more responsible and independent in learning vocabulary.

The teacher further explained that dictionary use was integrated into almost all learning tasks. Students were first required to search for word meanings independently before receiving further assistance from the teacher. She explained:

"Pertama tugas-tugasnya. Mereka harus cari sendiri makanya saya suruh bawa kamus. Makanya mereka cari sendiri di kamus, otomatis kalo dia cari sendiri sedikit banyaknya"

pasti ada yang tertinggal, seperti itu. Kemudian kalo tugas-tugas yang di papan tulis juga dia cari lagi lewat kamus lagi, lalu menghafal-menghafal nya, begitulah kalo sejauh mana Guru bantu anak-anaknya, mungkin begitu garis besarnya."

"First, in doing tasks, students have to search by themselves, which is why I ask them to bring dictionaries. They look up the meanings on their own, and naturally some parts may be left out. When working on tasks on the board, they also look up words again in the dictionary, followed by memorization. That is generally how I assist the students." (Teachers' Interview, 15 September 2025).

The interview results supported the observation findings and provided deeper insight into the teacher's reasons for implementing dictionary-based learning. The teacher stated that bringing a dictionary was mandatory for students and had been agreed upon at the beginning of the learning process. The teacher explained that this requirement was intended to train students to become independent learners and to help them develop vocabulary awareness. According to the teacher, students were encouraged to find word meanings on their own before asking for help, which helped reduce their reliance on direct explanations. Nevertheless, the teacher acknowledged that not all students could fully understand dictionary definitions independently. Therefore, teacher guidance and scaffolding were still necessary to help students interpret meanings correctly and apply them in context.

5. DISCUSSION

Based on the findings dictionary-based learning functioned as a core instructional strategy rather than a supplementary activity. The teacher consistently required students to bring dictionaries and positioned dictionary use as the first step in completing learning tasks. This suggests that the teacher intentionally promoted learner autonomy by encouraging students to actively search for word meanings before receiving explanations. From an interpretative perspective, this approach reflects a shift from teacher-centered instruction toward more learner-centered practices, even within a young learner context.

Analysis of the observation data shows that dictionary-based learning was applied across various lesson topics and learning activities. Students used dictionaries during worksheet completion, board work, and vocabulary exercises, which enabled repeated exposure to vocabulary items. This repeated engagement supports vocabulary retention and helps students develop independent learning habits. Interview data further explain that the teacher deliberately designed tasks to require dictionary use, followed by memorization and limited teacher assistance. This indicates the use of scaffolding, where support is gradually adjusted based on students' abilities. Such practices are particularly important for young learners, who still require guidance while developing independent learning skills.

Despite these positive outcomes, the findings also reveal several limitations in the implementation of dictionary-based learning. Some students experienced difficulty understanding dictionary definitions, especially when meanings were complex or abstract. As a result, the teacher often needed to simplify explanations and provide contextual examples. This highlights that dictionary-based learning alone is insufficient

without adequate teacher mediation. Additionally, reflection activities were not consistently conducted at the end of each lesson. Although the teacher evaluated strategy effectiveness informally based on student responses, the lack of structured reflection limited opportunities for systematic instructional improvement.

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that dictionary-based learning contributes positively to vocabulary development, learner responsibility, and classroom engagement when implemented consistently and supported by appropriate scaffolding. However, the effectiveness of this strategy depends on the teacher's ability to guide students, address learning difficulties, and reflect on instructional practices. These findings situate dictionary-based learning as a practical and meaningful strategy for teaching English to young learners, while also acknowledging the need for refinement in its implementation.

6. CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings and discussions, the researcher can be concluded that dictionary-based learning is an effective strategy for teaching English vocabulary to young learners. The findings indicate that the consistent use of dictionaries encourages students to become more active, responsible, and independent in learning vocabulary. Through this strategy, students are trained to search for word meanings independently before receiving teacher explanations. However, the findings also show that young learners still require teacher guidance to correctly understand dictionary meanings. Therefore, dictionary-based learning should be supported by appropriate scaffolding and simple explanations. Overall, integrating dictionary-based learning with teacher support can create a more meaningful and effective English learning process for young learners.

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