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A STUDY ON THE APPROPRIATENESS OF VOCABULARY IN THE GRADE IX ENGLISH TEXTBOOK: PERSPECTIVES OF TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

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Abstract

Vocabulary appropriateness in EFL textbooks remains underexamined in Southwest Papua, where regional disparities in English exposure and limited supplementary resources create conditions distinct from those commonly discussed in the literature. This study examined teacher and student perspectives on vocabulary in the Grade IX English textbook published by Intan Pariwara (*Bahasa Inggris untuk SMP/MTs Kelas 9*) at MTs Negeri Kota Sorong, Southwest Papua, a context where English is largely confined to the classroom. Six participants were recruited through purposive sampling: two English teachers and four Grade IX students, whose combination enabled triangulation between instructional context and lived experience. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews conducted in *Bahasa Indonesia* and translated into English for reporting purposes, then analyzed using the thematic analysis framework of Naeem et al. (2023), with theoretical grounding in Nation (2024), McGrath (2016), and Beck et al. (2013). Four themes emerged: perceived difficulty, vocabulary type, adequacy of support, and learning and teaching strategies. Teachers rated the vocabulary as moderately difficult, while students consistently described it as genuinely difficult, particularly the academic and scientific vocabulary in report texts, which concentrates in Tier 2 and Tier 3 categories. Both groups considered in-text vocabulary support insufficient: glossaries were absent from most units, per-unit word lists were limited, and scaffolding was minimal. Consequently, students relied on tools such as Google Translate and ChatGPT not out of preference but due to limited alternatives, a pattern teachers also acknowledged. Overall, the textbook was considered only partially appropriate, and recommended priority revisions include per-unit vocabulary lists, explicit scaffolding for report text vocabulary, and a comprehensive end-of-book glossary.

Keywords: Vocabulary Appropriateness, EFL Textbook Evaluation, Teacher and Student Perspectives, Junior Secondary Education

INTRODUCTION

In many junior secondary classrooms across eastern Indonesia, students regularly encounter unfamiliar vocabulary during English lessons with limited in-class resources to resolve it. At MTs Negeri Kota Sorong, this pattern was directly observed: students navigating vocabulary difficulty in a context where phone use is restricted to teacher-directed activities and supplementary English resources remain scarce. Nation (2024) explains that vocabulary acquisition is a slow process requiring repeated encounters across different contexts before learners can understand and use words productively. Reading a word once in a textbook is not enough.

In Indonesia, textbooks function as the curriculum itself. Government policy requires English instruction to be built around approved materials, making these books the primary and often sole source of English vocabulary input students receive. This places significant weight on a single resource. In many classrooms, if the textbook does not work for the students using it, there is very little else to fall back on.

Prior research has identified persistent concerns. Herlina et al. (2020) found that teachers across four West Java schools flagged excessive unfamiliar vocabulary in reading passages as a major source of difficulty, with the textbook also falling short in vocabulary practice. Corpus-based studies reveal deeper structural problems: Rahmat and Coxhead (2021) found students would need 5,000–6,000-word families to read senior high school textbooks independently, far beyond the estimated vocabulary of most Indonesian learners. Husna et al. (2025) extended this to the junior high level, finding the Grade 8 English for Nusantara textbook requires 3,000–4,000-word families again, well above typical learner levels. Syairofi et al. (2022), analyzing a Grade VII English textbook, found that while activities were theoretically grounded in SLA principles, opportunities for meaningful interaction remained limited.

What these studies share is a reliance on document analysis or corpus measurement at a distance from actual classroom life. Nearly all are grounded in Java. Research from eastern Indonesia remains scarce in the EFL vocabulary literature. West Papua including Sorong, the largest city in Southwest Papua, where students come from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds and English is largely confined to the classroom, has yet to receive sustained scholarly attention. The limited work that does exist suggests that English exposure outside the classroom remains minimal even among university-level English majors in the region (Idrus et al., 2025). The present study responds to this gap directly.

Three research gaps guide this study. First, no study has examined the Grade IX Intan Pariwara textbook used at MTs Negeri Kota Sorong. Second, existing corpus studies measure how many words students need but have not explored how vocabulary difficulty is actually experienced in daily learning. Third, little research has examined how specific pedagogical conditions limited instructional support, suboptimal classroom interaction, and minimal explicit vocabulary teaching shape the way students experience vocabulary difficulty. Official assessments indicate that classroom learning quality at MTs level in Kota Sorong is steadily developing, with continued efforts to improve teacher–student interaction and classroom support (Kemendikdasmen, 2025). These conditions remain largely unaddressed in the EFL vocabulary research literature.

It is precisely the intersection of these three gaps — an unexamined textbook, unmeasured lived experience of difficulty, and underexplored pedagogical conditions — that the present study addresses. Classroom observations confirmed that vocabulary difficulty became most visible during report text activities, where formal academic and scientific terminology led students to consult dictionaries and rely on Google Translate and ChatGPT not out of preference, but necessity. These realities shaped the focus of the present study.

Research Questions

This study is guided by four research questions: (1) How do teachers and students perceive the difficulty level of vocabulary in the Grade IX English textbook? (2) What types of vocabulary do they find most challenging? (3) How sufficient is the vocabulary support provided in the textbook? (4) What strategies do teachers and students employ when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary?

Significance of the Study

This study documents the experiences of teachers and students in Sorong, translating their observations into actionable findings. For publishers, it provides specific feedback on vocabulary support gaps. For curriculum developers, it offers a data point from an underrepresented region. For teachers in similar contexts across eastern Indonesia, it confirms that classroom challenges they observe are real and worth addressing.

Literature Review

The Role of Vocabulary in Language Learning

Nation (2024) describes vocabulary acquisition as something that happens gradually across many encounters in contexts that give words real meaning. Nation also distinguishes between receptive knowledge recognizing and understanding a word when reading or hearing it and productive knowledge, involving accurate use in speech or writing. For junior high school EFL students, receptive knowledge is typically the primary instructional goal, as it underpins reading comprehension across text types.

The question of how well textbooks support this has been examined in corpus-based research. Sun and Dang (2020) found that a significant share of vocabulary in high school EFL textbooks sits outside the range of what students at that level could reasonably be expected to know. Bergström et al. (2022) added that mid-frequency vocabulary tends to appear once or twice and then disappear insufficient for retention. In Indonesia, Syairofi et al. (2022) found that national English textbooks do not consistently apply SLA principles related to input provision, output practice, and gradual language knowledge development.

Vocabulary Tier Classification

Beck et al. (2013) propose a three-tiered vocabulary classification model widely applied in EFL textbook evaluation. Tier 1 comprises basic, high-frequency words acquired through everyday exposure. Tier 2 encompasses general academic vocabulary words such as analyze, precaution, and approximately that appear across multiple subject domains and are central to academic literacy. Tier 3 consists of low-frequency, domain-specific terminology typically encountered in technical or scientific discourse. For junior high school EFL learners, an overrepresentation of Tier 2 and Tier 3 items without corresponding scaffolding risks overwhelming students. This framework is particularly relevant to report texts in the Intan Pariwara Grade IX textbook, characterized by formal register and high concentrations of technical and scientific vocabulary.

EFL Textbook Evaluation

McGrath (2016) offers a framework for what a good EFL textbook does with vocabulary: how vocabulary is introduced, whether it recurs often enough for retention, and whether the book provides accessible tools, glossaries, word lists, reference sections. That learners can use independently. The empirical picture from Indonesian EFL research is consistent: Hanifa et al. (2024) found that when textbook vocabulary exceeds student readiness, teachers make practical adjustments to keep students engaged — a response shaped by the limited alternatives available within approved curriculum materials.

Vocabulary Learning Strategies and Digital Tools

When students encounter unfamiliar vocabulary, digital tools have increasingly become the first response. Essafi (2025) found that online dictionaries and AI tools like ChatGPT had become dominant among EFL students. Indonesian learners show a related pattern: Zuhairi and Mistar (2023) found that EFL students apply vocabulary learning strategies at a moderate level, with metacognitive and encoding strategies used most frequently.

However, reliance on these tools carries risks. Moelyono et al. (2023) found that Google Translate boosted confidence but reduced engagement with the target language. Urlaub and Dessein (2022) argued that machine translation flattens contextual nuance and requires explicit pedagogical framing to productively support learning. When implemented thoughtfully, digital tools can support acquisition: Fakira et al. (2025) demonstrated that AI translation tools enhanced vocabulary learning when integrated into instruction, and Octaberlina (2023) emphasized that effectiveness in Indonesian EFL contexts is contingent on teacher mediation.

METHOD

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative design because the research questions call for understanding how teachers and students experience vocabulary difficulty the meaning they make of it, the strategies they reach for, and the gaps they notice in their own words. No quantitative data were collected or analyzed. Involving both teachers and students was a deliberate methodological choice: teachers' perspectives provide professional and instructional context, while students' accounts reflect lived experience with the textbook, enabling triangulation that strengthens the credibility of findings (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection instrument. Interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia to ensure participants could express themselves naturally. Transcripts were subsequently translated into English for reporting, with care taken to preserve the original meaning of participants' responses.

The study is grounded in an interpretivist epistemology, which holds that knowledge is always shaped by the context in which it is produced. Data were analyzed using a six-step thematic analysis procedure developed by Naeem et al. (2023), which builds upon the original framework of Braun and Clarke (2006): transcription and familiarization with the data, selection of keywords, coding, theme development, conceptualization through interpretation, and development of a conceptual model. Thematic analysis was chosen because it focuses on finding patterns across participant responses while allowing the researcher to interpret meaning rather than merely count words the most suitable approach for a study centering on how teachers and students experience vocabulary difficulty in their own context.

Research Setting

MTs Negeri Kota Sorong is a state Islamic junior high school in Sorong City, Southwest Papua, enrolling students from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. English is encountered almost exclusively within the school environment. The textbook under study is

Bahasa Inggris untuk SMP/MTs Kelas 9 (Intan Pariwara), aligned with the 2013 Curriculum and covering report, analytical exposition, and narrative text types.

Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring all had direct and sustained experience with the Grade IX Intan Pariwara textbook. Two English teachers and four Grade IX students participated. This dual-participant design reflects a deliberate triangulation strategy: teachers' professional perspectives contextualize and validate students' accounts, strengthening the credibility and depth of the findings.

Teacher 1 (Ibu N) and Teacher 2 (Ibu M) both teach across Grades VII to IX. Four Grade IX students were drawn from different classes to capture a range of experiences, selected to represent varied proficiency levels to ensure the study did not hear only from the strongest learners: Student 1 G (Grade IX E), Student 2 S (Grade IX D), Student 3 A (Grade IX D), and Student 4 Y (Grade IX A). A summary of participant profiles is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile of Research Participants

No.	Code	Role	Class	Key Characteristics
1	Teacher 1	English Teacher	VII–IX	Observes broadly similar comprehension levels across higher- and average-ability classes, though gaps emerge with more demanding text types
2	Teacher 2	English Teacher	VII–IX	Rates vocabulary difficulty as moderate; believes comprehension improves given sufficient time and guided exposure
3	Student 1	Student	IX E	Finds most vocabulary manageable with consistent effort; relies on a physical dictionary and phone-based tools when stuck
4	Student 2	Student	IX D	Reports consistent difficulty with new vocabulary across units; actively seeks supplementary support tools
5	Student 3	Student	IX D	Notices that many new words appear without any explanation; recommends a full glossary organized by chapter
6	Student 4	Student	IX A	Demonstrates relatively greater confidence with textbook vocabulary; uses contextual reading as primary learning strategy

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection instrument. Two separate protocols were developed one for teachers and one for students each consisting of ten questions addressing vocabulary difficulty, support tools, instructional strategies, and improvement suggestions. Interview data were analyzed using the six-step thematic analysis framework of Naeem et al. (2023): transcription and familiarization, keyword selection, coding, theme development, interpretation, and conceptual model development. Repeated reading of transcripts allowed recurring patterns to surface across participants. Themes were

constructed through deliberate interpretive decisions at each stage, reflecting the researcher's active role in the analytical process.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Findings

Four themes emerged from the thematic analysis of interview data: perceptions of vocabulary difficulty, types of vocabulary found most challenging, sufficiency of vocabulary support, and strategies employed when encountering unfamiliar words. The findings below present participants' responses as they were reported, using direct quotations to anchor each theme.

Teachers' and Students' Perceptions of Vocabulary Difficulty

Teacher 1 described the vocabulary level as moderate and generally appropriate for Grade IX, while acknowledging that some students still needed extra guidance to keep up. Teacher 2 framed the situation as a split: students in higher-ability classes worked through vocabulary without much trouble, while average-ability classes hit difficulties more frequently. Both teachers attributed the difficulty primarily to external factors study time, individual effort, and teacher facilitation rather than to the textbook itself.

"The difficulty level is moderate. Because actually, students' ability to memorize vocabulary depends on how much time the teacher gives and how long the time provided to memorize the vocabulary. (Teacher 2)"

Students told a different story. Three out of four described the vocabulary as genuinely and consistently difficult. Student 2 noted that nearly every page introduced words that had never appeared in any previous textbook. Student 3 reported that new words appeared without any explanation no gloss, no definition, no contextual hint. Student 4 was more measured, finding most vocabulary manageable but noting that words like approximately had been entirely new when first encountered. Student 1 acknowledged that unfamiliar words came up regularly enough to cause real problems.

"It is difficult, because there are some words that I only encountered for the first time in grade 9. On every page, I always come across new words that only appear in the grade 9 textbook. (Student 2)"

Types of Vocabulary Found Most Challenging

Both teachers pointed to academic and scientific vocabulary in report texts as the source of concentrated difficulty. Teacher 1 described these texts as operating in a formal register that students do not encounter outside of school. Teacher 2 gave a concrete example: the word precaution kept recurring in class, and despite students understanding the concept, the word's spelling, pronunciation, and unfamiliar form gave them trouble every time.

"Yes, especially when there is scientific language. Particularly in report texts, because the text is structured like a research paper. So, scientific language is very difficult for students to understand. (Teacher 1)"

Students named specific words they found difficult. Student 1 cited adore, resembling, and elongated words with verb suffixes and participial forms that felt grammatically as well as lexically unfamiliar. Student 4 returned to approximately. Student 2 reported that some words could not even be found in a standard dictionary, leaving the usual fallback unavailable.

Sufficiency of Vocabulary Support in the Textbook

Teacher 2 considered the per-chapter vocabulary list a reasonably useful starting point. Teacher 1 was more cautious: she acknowledged a vocabulary list at the back of the book but noted that students rarely opened it, and that vocabulary sections within individual chapters were limited absent in some units and thin where they did appear. Students were more consistent with each other. All four described the vocabulary support as insufficient. Student 2 proposed a dedicated vocabulary section within each unit rather than only at the back. Student 3 recommended a glossary organized by chapter content, connecting words to material students were actively working through.

"Perhaps if there are many new vocabularies in the book, it might be worth considering adding a short glossary at the back of it, corresponding to the lessons contained in the book. (Student 3)"

Student 4 observed that the textbook offered more exercises than explanations, and suggested reversing that balance providing more vocabulary meanings alongside the existing tasks.

"From this book, what mostly appears are exercises and questions. So, if possible, it would be better to include more vocabulary meanings listed in the book and also provide more learning material. (Student 4)"

Strategies Employed When Encountering Unfamiliar Vocabulary

Both teachers described an independence-first approach: dictionary first, then the teacher, then the internet. Teacher 1 was explicit about the logic attempting to find an answer yourself, even unsuccessfully, builds self-reliance. Teacher 2 also assigned vocabulary translation tasks to push students to engage actively with new words.

"I ask them to look it up in the dictionary first. If they are stuck and cannot find it, then I will help them. If it is truly not in the dictionary, only then they may search on the internet. They must try first. (Teacher 1)"

Students' strategies varied. Student 4 defaulted to Google Translate, following up with a teacher or dictionary when a translation felt uncertain. Student 2 used ChatGPT at home when vocabulary stopped making sense and other resources had run out. Student 1 reached for a phone-based dictionary at home when no printed dictionary was available. Students 1 and 2 favored writing words out repeatedly to aid retention, while Students 3 and 4 preferred reading in context, finding that repeated contextual encounter made meaning feel retrievable.

"Most of the time, I look it up on Google Translate. But if I am unsure about the answer, I immediately ask the teacher or look it up in the dictionary. (Student 4)"

Discussion

Perceptions of Vocabulary Difficulty: A Gap Between Teachers and Students

The contrast between teacher and student perceptions is itself a significant finding. Neither teacher described the textbook as fundamentally misaligned with their students' needs. Both attributed vocabulary difficulty primarily to factors outside the book study time, individual effort, and the teacher's facilitation. Students, however, experienced the vocabulary as consistently and structurally challenging, not as an occasional obstacle.

Those are different measures, and the textbook sits differently depending on which one is used. This pattern is not unique to Sorong. Hanifa et al. (2024) documented a similar dynamic in Indonesian EFL contexts, where teachers adjust their teaching when textbook vocabulary is too difficult for students — a reasonable response given that the limitations they face are not of their own making. The implication is that teacher assessments of textbook adequacy may reflect a different evaluative framework than students lived experience. Teachers calibrate against curriculum expectations and prior cohorts; students calibrate against what they can actually do with a word when they encounter it alone. These are different measures, and recognizing this distinction is not a criticism of teachers but a reflection of the different vantage points each group necessarily occupies. This pattern is especially visible in settings with limited resources, where teachers do their best with the materials they have. The contextual dimension of this gap also matters. In cities where students encounter English through media, signage, and informal interaction, informal exposure partially compensates for gaps in formal instruction.

In Sorong, where such contact with English outside the classroom is rare, the textbook carries a heavier burden. Students arrive with a narrower vocabulary base and have fewer opportunities to supplement it independently. Under these conditions, a textbook considered manageable in Jakarta can feel considerably harder for a student in Sorong not because students here are less capable, but because the environment that naturally supports English learning has not developed to the same degree in this region. Evaluations of textbook appropriateness must therefore account for specific sociolinguistic conditions, not only curriculum-level standards. Critically, the difficulty that surfaces in Grade IX did not begin there. Without deliberate cross-grade lexical planning, vocabulary gaps accumulate quietly across Grades VII and VIII until they become visible and consequential enough for students to articulate directly.

Types of Vocabulary Found Most Challenging: Tier 2 as a Hidden Problem

The pattern of difficulty identified by both teachers and students maps consistently onto Beck et al.'s (2013) three-tier framework. The words that caused the most trouble cluster firmly in Tier 2 and Tier 3 categories: domain-specific scientific vocabulary in report texts on one hand, and mid-frequency academic words like elongated, resembling, and approximately on the other. The difficulty with Tier 3 terms is expected and pedagogically well-documented. Scientific and academic register draws on specialized vocabulary that students are unlikely to have encountered outside formal schooling, and report texts with their impersonal language, technical noun phrases, and scientific classifications place unusually high demands on a learner with no prior exposure to this register. What is more diagnostically significant is the difficulty with Tier 2 words. These are not rare or obscure terms; they are the kind of vocabulary educated English users encounter regularly in non-technical reading. Their appearance on students' lists of the hardest vocabulary suggests that students are arriving in Grade IX without the mid-frequency foundation the textbook tacitly assumes they possess not because the curriculum failed to place these words earlier, but because earlier placements were not supported with the structured exposure that produces retention.

Teacher 2's observation about precaution illustrates an important distinction the findings raise: the difference between conceptual difficulty and lexical difficulty. Students understood what taking precautions meant the idea was not beyond them. What gave them trouble was the word's phonological and orthographic form: its spelling, its pronunciation, the

way it looks and sounds on the page. The issue is not that students cannot grasp complex ideas; it is that the formal properties of academic vocabulary are inadequately reinforced through repeated, meaningful encounter. A textbook that introduces a word once in a dense report text, with no glossing, no follow-up activity, and no recycling across units, makes retention genuinely unlikely regardless of how capable the learner is. Student 2's report that some words could not even be found in a standard dictionary sharpens this concern further: if a word appears in a nationally distributed textbook but is not retrievable through the primary reference tool students are directed to use, the expected learning pathway does not function as intended. This points to a design gap that warrants careful attention in future revisions, particularly regarding the alignment between textbook vocabulary and the reference resources students are realistically able to access

Sufficiency of Vocabulary Support: Design Gaps and Their Consequences

The students' recommendations were specific and consistent across four participants from different classes: a glossary organized by chapter, a dedicated vocabulary section within each unit, and meanings provided alongside the words rather than left for students to find elsewhere. These suggestions map almost directly onto what the literature identifies as effective vocabulary support in textbook design. McGrath (2016) identifies in-text glossing, contextually organized word lists, and meaning-focused support as essential features. What students described exercises without explanations, vocabulary lists that do not reach into every unit, words appearing in context without any indication of meaning falls short of those criteria at several points.

The absence of such scaffolding has real consequences. Husein et al. (2024) demonstrated that contextually embedded vocabulary instruction produces measurable gains in acquisition, and Nation (2024) is clear that the goal is not to remove difficulty from a textbook but to ensure that difficulty is supported well enough that it can actually be learned from. Without that support, challenging vocabulary stops being a learning opportunity and becomes something students work around rather than through. The pattern described by participants reaching for Google Translate, returning to teachers for clarification on the same words, writing down translations they cannot later contextualize is precisely what happens when vocabulary support is absent or poorly designed.

Student 4's observation that the textbook offered more exercises than explanations reflect a common but consequential tension in EFL textbook design: the balance between a task-focused approach and a meaning-focused one. Task-based approaches have strong theoretical support, but their effectiveness depends on learners having sufficient vocabulary knowledge to engage meaningfully with the tasks. When learners encounter tasks requiring vocabulary, they do not yet possess, the task does not generate learning. It generates confusion and avoidance. This is precisely the dynamic that students described: not engagement with challenging material, but encounters with material that could not be processed at all. When tasks consistently come before meaning-focused support, the intended challenge may end up blocking learning altogether — not intentionally, but because the tasks assume vocabulary knowledge that many students here do not yet have.

Teacher 1's observation that students rarely opened the vocabulary list at the back of the book is significant not as a criticism of students but as a design insight. Vocabulary support that is physically separated from the point of difficulty requires students to interrupt

their reading, navigate to a different section of the book, locate the relevant entry, and return to the original text. For students who are already struggling, this friction is often prohibitive. Effective textbook design integrates support at the point of need in-text glosses, marginal definitions, embedded vocabulary sections within each unit precisely because it reduces the cost of accessing help when it is most needed. A list at the back of the book, however comprehensive, cannot substitute for support at the point of encounter.

In the Sorong context specifically, the stakes of inadequate vocabulary support are higher than in much of the existing national literature. When informal English exposure outside school is rare, the textbook functions as the primary and often sole source of English vocabulary input across the week. A support deficit in the textbook therefore has no natural compensatory mechanism. Students cannot simply read more in English at home, watch more English-medium content, or draw on environmental exposure to fill the gap. What the textbook does not provide, in this context, largely goes unprovided. This is a point that nationally designed materials built with a more typical urban Indonesian learner in mind may not adequately account for.

Vocabulary Learning Strategies: Resourcefulness Under Constraint

The teachers' independence-first approach carries genuine pedagogical value. McGrath (2016) identifies structured sequencing dictionary before teacher, teacher before internet as consistent with effective vocabulary teaching practice, and Essafi (2025) notes that dictionary consultation remains the dominant first response among EFL learners before they turn to other resources. Encouraging students to attempt resolution before asking for help builds learner autonomy that serves them beyond any single classroom. The approach makes pedagogical sense. The question is what happens when the dictionary does not contain the word, the teacher is helping many other students in the class, and the textbook provides no further help. That is precisely the situation several students described, and it is a situation the independence-first model does not fully account for.

The prominent role of digital tools in student accounts Google Translate, ChatGPT, phone-based dictionaries is less a sign of technological preference than a sign of what happens when other options run out. Moelyono et al. (2023) and Essafi (2025) both document the same pattern: when textbooks leave vocabulary unexplained, learners turn to technology not because they have chosen to but because they have to. The tools are a response to a gap, not a replacement for structured learning. That distinction matters for how teachers and curriculum designers interpret student behavior. Students reaching for Google Translate are not bypassing the learning process; they are attempting to re-enter it when other entry points have been closed off. Seeing this behavior as laziness or over-reliance on technology misses the point. Students turn to these tools because the textbook itself does not provide enough support.

Fakira et al. (2025) and Octaberlina (2023) found that digital translation tools support vocabulary learning effectively only when integrated into structured pedagogical guidance used deliberately, with clear purpose, as part of a coherent learning sequence. In the context this study describes, none of that structure was in place. Students were reaching for whatever worked in the moment, without guidance on how to evaluate translation quality, how to move from understanding a word in isolation to using it in context, or how to build from a single translation encounter toward durable retention. When students use these tools just to get

through a task, without any guidance, they are unlikely to actually remember the words — because their goal in that moment is to finish, not to learn.

The variation in preferred learning strategies across students adds one more layer to the picture. Students 1 and 2 favored rote repetition writing words out repeatedly while Students 3 and 4 preferred encountering words through reading in context. Cahyani et al. (2024) affirm that varied approaches to vocabulary learning tend to be more effective than uniform ones, and that different learners respond to different modes of engagement. Neither approach described by students is wrong; both can produce retention under the right conditions. But the fact that students arrived at these strategies independently without explicit guidance from the textbook or structured classroom support suggests that strategy development relied largely on individual initiative.

This matters in particular for equity. Students with stronger metacognitive skills, greater access to resources, or more supportive home environments are better positioned to develop effective strategies independently. Students who lack these advantages are more likely to persist with ineffective strategies or to disengage entirely. A textbook that provides explicit guidance on vocabulary learning strategies, not only vocabulary content would help level this playing field. In the absence of such guidance, the strategies students employ are pragmatic and understandable, but they are workarounds rather than pathways to acquisition, and they leave the most vulnerable learners most exposed.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Conclusion

Findings from interviews with two teachers and four students consistently pointed in the same direction, and the convergence of their perspectives across different roles and class groups strengthened confidence in the conclusions drawn. Five conclusions carried the weight of the analysis.

First, teachers rated vocabulary as moderate while students described it as genuinely difficult particularly in report texts where academic and scientific vocabulary concentrates. This gap reflects the naturally different vantage points from which teachers and students experience the same classroom material. Teachers calibrate against curriculum expectations; students calibrate against what they can actually do with a word when they encounter it alone.

Second, tier 2 and tier 3 vocabulary caused the most trouble, and many difficult words had never appeared in earlier grade textbooks. The problem is not merely that words are hard it is that difficult vocabulary arrived without preparation, without prior encounter, and without any contextual scaffolding to build from.

Third, vocabulary scaffolding was assessed as insufficient by both groups. Glossaries were absent from most units, per-unit word lists were limited, and no deliberate vocabulary progression was evident across units. Scaffolding implies anticipation — identifying in advance which words are likely to cause difficulty and building support around them before students hit a wall. The textbook, as described by participants, leaves that work largely undone. This insufficiency carries particular weight in the Sorong context, where students have minimal English exposure outside the classroom and the textbook functions as virtually

the only source of vocabulary input across the week. Under these conditions, vocabulary that arrives without support is vocabulary that is unlikely to stay.

Fourth, students reached for digital tools because the text had stopped making sense and neither the book nor the immediate classroom environment offered an accessible way to regain understanding. This reflects not technological preference but a support deficit that better textbook design and more deliberate classroom instruction could substantially reduce.

The overall verdict is that the textbook is partially appropriate. It exposes students to the academic vocabulary that Grade IX literacy requires, and that exposure is not nothing. What it lacks is the infrastructure glossaries, scaffolding, and deliberate vocabulary progression that would allow students to meet that language on workable terms. The gap is between what the textbook presents and what it does to help students receive it. That is a fixable problem, and the suggestions that follow are offered in that spirit.

Suggestions

For textbook publishers and curriculum developers: build vocabulary support into the book itself. Per-unit vocabulary lists with contextual definitions and example sentences, a complete end-of-book glossary, and explicit scaffolding around academic vocabulary in report texts are priority improvements. Vocabulary must also be sequenced deliberately across Grades VII to IX so students arrive in each year carrying a lexical foundation the next book can build on (Syairofi et al., 2022; Sun & Dang, 2020).

For teachers at MTs Negeri Kota Sorong: pre-teaching key vocabulary before students open report texts is the most practical starting point. Explicit instruction in vocabulary learning strategies is also essential specifically, helping students evaluate the accuracy of digital translation tools (Urlaub & Dessein, 2022). Octaberlina (2023) emphasizes that the effectiveness of digital tools in Indonesian EFL contexts depends on teacher mediation.

For school administrators: the textbook alone is not enough. In a school where students have limited access to English outside the classroom, supplementary vocabulary resources whether print-based or digital are not a luxury but a necessity. Simonnet et al. (2024) recommend technology-assisted vocabulary learning tools as a viable supplement when implemented with appropriate pedagogical guidance.

This study has limitations. Six participants from a single school restrict the generalizability of findings. Future research should employ larger, more diverse samples across multiple schools and regions in eastern Indonesia. The exclusive reliance on interview data could productively be complemented by corpus-based vocabulary analysis, standardized vocabulary assessments, and systematic classroom observation.

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