

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. Background of the Study

In today's increasingly globalized world, the ability to communicate in English is considered a crucial skill. English has become the global lingua franca, playing a dominant role in international communication, education, and business (Graddol, 2010). This shift has placed a significant emphasis on the need for early English language education, especially in non-native speaking countries such as Indonesia. English language skills are essential for students to compete in the global economy and succeed in higher education, where English often serves as the medium of instruction (Kirkpatrick, 2010). In response, English has been introduced at the primary school level, allowing children to develop foundational language skills at an early age. As a result, developing strong English language foundations, particularly vocabulary knowledge, has become an important objective of English instruction at the elementary school level.

Among the four language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—vocabulary plays a foundational role. Vocabulary knowledge is critical because it directly impacts a learner's ability to understand spoken and written texts and express ideas effectively (Schmitt, 2010). Research has consistently shown that vocabulary size correlates strongly with overall language proficiency, making vocabulary acquisition a key aspect of language learning (Nation, 2013). However, acquiring a broad vocabulary is a complex process that requires effective teaching strategies, particularly for young learners who are in the early stages of language development.

Young learners, such as those in elementary school, face unique challenges in acquiring new vocabulary. They often need concrete and interactive methods to engage with language, as abstract explanations or rote memorization are less effective at this stage of cognitive development (Pinter, 2017). Children are naturally curious and learn best when they are actively involved in the learning process. Therefore, teaching methods that incorporate

visual aids and hands-on activities can significantly enhance vocabulary retention and understanding (Garton & Copland, 2018). Visual aids, such as pictures, flashcards, and real objects, help bridge the gap between abstract language concepts and concrete understanding. Therefore, the use of visual aids has considerable potential to support vocabulary learning among young learners in elementary school settings (Wright, 2010).

The effectiveness of visual aids in language teaching is supported by *Dual Coding Theory*, which posits that information is better retained when it is processed through both verbal and visual channels (Paivio, 2013). By presenting vocabulary alongside visual representations, teachers can create stronger cognitive associations, helping learners to better understand and recall new words (Mayer, 2014). This approach is particularly important in vocabulary instruction, where visual aids can clarify the meanings of new words and provide context for their use in everyday situations. Consequently, visual aids can serve as an effective instructional medium for enhancing vocabulary learning among elementary school students.

Despite a growing body of research supporting the use of visual aids in language teaching, many classrooms in Indonesia still rely on traditional, teacher-centred methods of instruction that may not fully engage young learners (Widodo, 2016). In these contexts, students may struggle to retain new vocabulary, leading to low proficiency levels. At SD Mulia Bakti Purwokerto, a private elementary school in Central Java, students are exposed to three languages—Indonesian, English, and Mandarin; with English taught as a foreign language alongside Mandarin.

However, vocabulary mastery remains a challenge among third-grade students. Based on the results of the English summative assessment in the first semester of the 2025/2026 academic year, the students obtained a mean score of 62, which was below the school's minimum passing grade (KKM) of 68. To further confirm students' vocabulary mastery, a preliminary assessment was conducted prior to the implementation of the research, and the results showed a mean score of 61.57, which also fell below the KKM. This indicates that students' vocabulary mastery was consistently low and requires immediate

pedagogical enhancement. In addition, preliminary classroom observations showed that students often struggled to recall and apply newly introduced vocabulary during learning activities, further confirming the need for instructional improvement.

Third-grade students were selected as research participants because they are at a crucial stage in building foundational English vocabulary that would support more advanced language learning in subsequent grades. In addition to low academic performance, observations showed that some students demonstrated limited motivation and enthusiasm during vocabulary learning activities. The predominant use of traditional instructional methods, such as memorization and drilling, has not sufficiently supported students' vocabulary development or engagement. Therefore, a more engaging and developmentally appropriate instructional strategy was needed to address these challenges.

Previous studies have demonstrated that visual aids are effective in improving students' vocabulary mastery in various educational contexts. However, most of these studies focused on higher elementary level or secondary school students and were predominantly conducted in public or rural school settings. Research that specifically examines third-grade students in a private multilingual elementary school context remains limited. Furthermore, the systematic implementation of visual aids within a *Classroom Action Research* (CAR) framework at the lower elementary level has not been extensively explored. These gaps indicate the need for further investigation into the implementation of visual aids for young learners in a private multilingual elementary school context.

Therefore, this study aimed to investigate how the use of visual aids could enhance vocabulary mastery for third-grade students at SD Mulia Bakti Purwokerto. By implementing visual aids through a CAR design, this study was expected to provide context-specific empirical evidence and practical pedagogical insights for English teachers working with young learners in multilingual elementary school settings. Ultimately, the findings were expected to contribute to the enhancement of vocabulary instruction and English language education at the primary school level in Indonesia.

B. Research Question

Based on the background of the study, the research question of this study was, “Can visual aids enhance vocabulary mastery for third-grade students at SD Mulia Bakti Purwokerto?”

C. Research Objective

Based on the research question, the objective of this study was to enhance the vocabulary mastery of third-grade students at SD Mulia Bakti Purwokerto through the use of visual aids.

D. Significance of the Study

1. For the Researcher

This study allows the researcher to gain hands-on experience in applying CAR and testing the effectiveness of visual aids in vocabulary teaching. It also provides an opportunity to contribute to the body of knowledge in the field of language education and offer solutions for improving vocabulary instruction in elementary schools.

2. For Teachers

The results of this study provide the teachers with practical insights into how visual aids can be effectively incorporated into vocabulary lessons. By understanding which types of visual aids work best, the teachers will be able to create more engaging and effective learning environments, which can help enhance students' vocabulary retention and overall language proficiency.

3. For Students

The study aims to enhance students' vocabulary mastery by making learning more interactive and enjoyable through the use of visual aids. Students will benefit from a more engaging learning process that accommodates their cognitive needs and helps them better understand and use new vocabulary in meaningful contexts.

E. Scope and Limitations of the Study

1. Scope of the Study

This study focused on improving students' vocabulary mastery through the use of visual aids in English language instruction. The scope of the study was limited to third-grade students at SD Mulia Bakti Purwokerto in the academic year 2025/2026. The participants consisted of seven students from one class.

The study did not measure productive vocabulary skills such as speaking ability, pronunciation accuracy, or sentence production. The study specifically concentrated on students' receptive vocabulary knowledge, which included their ability to recognize word meaning, understand vocabulary in context, and recognize correct word form. The vocabulary materials were limited to two units in the second semester syllabus of the third grade, namely *Unit 6: Rooms in a School* and *Unit 8: School Activities*.

The instructional intervention applied in this study was the use of visual aids as the primary teaching media. The visual aids included flashcards, printed pictures, vocabulary labels, real objects, illustrated worksheets, and digital visual materials displayed through an *Interactive Flat Panel* (IFP). The research design employed was CAR, conducted in two cycles consisting of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting stages.

The measurement of vocabulary mastery was limited to structured multiple-choice vocabulary tests administered as pre-tests and post-tests in each cycle. Classroom observation was used as supporting qualitative data to describe the instructional process and students' engagement.

2. Limitations of the Study

This study had several limitations. First, the small number of participants limited the generalizability of the findings, as the results represented a specific classroom context. Second, the duration of the intervention was restricted to two instructional cycles, which might not fully capture long-term vocabulary development. Third, the findings were confined to the selected vocabulary topics and instructional setting.

Despite these limitations, the study was intended to provide contextual insights into the implementation of visual aids for improving receptive vocabulary mastery for elementary-level learners.

F. Definition of Key Terms

1. Vocabulary

Vocabulary refers to the set of words that a person knows or uses in communication. It includes both the understanding (receptive vocabulary) and production (productive vocabulary) of words in a language (Schmitt, 2010). Receptive vocabulary consists of the words learners can understand when they encounter them in spoken or written forms, while productive vocabulary involves words they can use actively in speaking and writing (Nation, 2013). Vocabulary is essential because it serves as the foundation for all language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—and is critical for understanding and producing language in meaningful ways (Garton & Copland, 2018). For young learners, vocabulary acquisition plays a crucial role in their overall language development, as it helps them comprehend new concepts and express their ideas effectively.

2. Vocabulary Mastery

Vocabulary mastery refers to the learner's ability to understand and use a wide range of vocabulary words accurately and appropriately in different communicative contexts (Schmitt, 2010). Mastery implies not only knowing the meaning of words but also understanding their correct usage, collocations, grammatical forms, and connotations (Nation, 2013). Achieving vocabulary mastery is a gradual process that requires repeated exposure to words in various contexts, allowing learners to fully internalize word meanings and apply them in both receptive and productive language tasks (Webb & Nation, 2017). For young learners, vocabulary mastery is particularly challenging, as it requires consistent practice and reinforcement through interactive learning strategies, such as the use of visual aids, to make new vocabulary more memorable and meaningful (Garton & Copland, 2018). In this study, vocabulary mastery specifically refers to students'

receptive vocabulary knowledge as measured through multiple-choice vocabulary tests administered during the pre-tests and post-tests.

3. Visual Aids

Visual aids refer to any teaching tools that incorporate visual elements, such as pictures, flashcards, diagrams, videos, or real objects, to support the learning process (Wright, 2010). Visual aids help learners connect abstract language concepts to concrete representations, making it easier for them to understand and remember new vocabulary (Paivio, 2013). According to *Dual Coding Theory*, visual aids enhance learning by engaging both the verbal and visual processing systems in the brain, resulting in stronger cognitive associations and improved retention (Mayer, 2014). In vocabulary teaching, visual aids are particularly effective for young learners, as they provide immediate context and visual references that help make new words more accessible and memorable (Garton & Copland, 2018). The use of visual aids also increases student engagement and motivation by creating a more interactive and enjoyable learning environment. In this study, visual aids refer to flashcards, printed pictures, vocabulary labels, real objects, illustrated worksheets, and digital visual materials used during the instructional activities.