

Investigating English Vocabulary Mastery and Its Influencing Factors in a Multilingual Islamic School: Evidence from Southern Thailand

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Abstract: This study investigates English vocabulary mastery and the factors influencing it among students in a multilingual Islamic school in Southern Thailand. The study employed a descriptive quantitative method with a cross-sectional survey design involving 31 seventh grade students at Jareeyatam Islamic Foundation School. Data were collected through a 25 items vocabulary test and a 20 items questionnaire measuring English exposure, English use, multilingual interference, and learning motivation. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and mean scores. The findings revealed that students' vocabulary mastery was generally very low, with a mean score of 42.97. Most participants (67.74%) were categorized at the very low level of vocabulary mastery. Among the factors examined, English exposure ($M = 2.90$) and learning motivation ($M = 2.61$) were at a moderate level, whereas English use ($M = 2.40$) and multilingual interference ($M = 2.31$) were at a low level. The results suggest that limited active use of English was the primary factor contributing to students' low vocabulary mastery. Although students demonstrated moderate exposure to English and learning motivation, insufficient opportunities to practice English meaningfully hindered vocabulary development. Therefore, increasing communicative and interactive English learning activities may help improve vocabulary acquisition in multilingual educational settings.

Keywords: Vocabulary Mastery; Multilingual School; English learning; Influencing Factors; English Exposure.

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis penguasaan kosakata bahasa Inggris serta faktor-faktor yang memengaruhinya pada siswa di sekolah Islam multibahasa di Thailand Selatan. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kuantitatif deskriptif dengan desain survei *cross-sectional* yang melibatkan 31 siswa kelas tujuh di Jareeyatam Islamic Foundation School. Data dikumpulkan melalui tes kosakata yang terdiri atas 25 soal pilihan ganda dan kuesioner berisi 20 butir pernyataan yang mengukur paparan bahasa Inggris, penggunaan bahasa Inggris, interferensi multibahasa, dan motivasi belajar. Data dianalisis menggunakan statistik deskriptif yang meliputi frekuensi, persentase, dan skor rata-rata. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa penguasaan kosakata siswa secara umum berada pada kategori sangat rendah dengan nilai rata-rata 42,97. Sebagian besar peserta (67,74%) tergolong pada tingkat penguasaan kosakata sangat rendah. Faktor-faktor yang diteliti meliputi paparan bahasa Inggris ($M = 2,90$) dan motivasi belajar ($M = 2,61$) berada pada kategori sedang, sedangkan penggunaan bahasa Inggris ($M = 2,40$) dan interferensi multibahasa ($M = 2,31$) berada pada kategori rendah. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa rendahnya penggunaan aktif bahasa Inggris menjadi faktor utama yang berkontribusi terhadap rendahnya penguasaan kosakata siswa. Meskipun siswa memiliki tingkat paparan bahasa Inggris dan motivasi belajar yang sedang, kurangnya kesempatan untuk menggunakan bahasa Inggris secara bermakna menghambat perkembangan kosakata mereka. Oleh karena itu, peningkatan kegiatan pembelajaran bahasa Inggris yang komunikatif dan

interaktif dapat membantu meningkatkan penguasaan kosakata dalam lingkungan pendidikan multibahasa.

Kata Kunci: Penguasaan Kosakata; Sekolah Multibahasa; Pembelajaran Bahasa Inggris; Faktor yang Memengaruhi; Paparan Bahasa Inggris.

INTRODUCTION

English plays a significant role in supporting global communication and educational development. As an international language, English enables learners to access academic resources, engage in intercultural communication, and compete in the global workforce (Sevinch et al., 2025). In non-English speaking countries such as Thailand, English is learned as a foreign language (EFL), meaning that it is rarely used in daily communication and is mainly practiced in formal settings such as classrooms or academic environments (Permadi et al., 2025). As a result, students often receive limited English input, particularly in terms of vocabulary exposure.

Vocabulary knowledge plays an essential role in learning English. Having sufficient vocabulary allows learners to understand texts, share ideas, and communicate successfully through listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities (Kusrini & Amalia, 2021). On the other hand, students with limited vocabulary knowledge frequently encounter challenges in understanding instructions, participating in classroom learning, and expressing ideas accurately. Earlier studies have also indicated that vocabulary knowledge has a strong connection with reading comprehension, as learners' ability to understand English texts is greatly influenced by the number of words they know (Ramadani et al., 2021; Rahmah et al., 2023). Consequently, inadequate vocabulary mastery can negatively affect learners' overall English comprehension and academic performance.

Vocabulary mastery includes receptive and productive knowledge. Receptive vocabulary refers to recognizing and understanding words in listening and reading, while productive vocabulary involves using words accurately in speaking and writing (Bao & Peng, 2024). Previous research has shown that vocabulary knowledge is closely related to reading comprehension, and limited vocabulary can hinder learners' overall English achievement (Ramadani et al., 2021). Therefore, developing students' vocabulary knowledge is essential to support their English learning process.

The challenge of vocabulary learning becomes more complex in multilingual educational contexts. In Southern Thailand, language use is influenced by the coexistence of several languages in students' daily lives. In Islamic schools located in Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and Satun provinces, students grow up in linguistically diverse environments where Malay (Patani Malay) is commonly used in everyday communication within the Muslim community, although Thai is more dominant in Satun (Joll & Aree, 2021). Hence, students are exposed to multiple languages simultaneously, which may influence their English vocabulary learning process.

Approximately 83% of the population in Thailand's Deep South, or more than one million people across four border provinces, are Muslim and speak Patani Malay as their mother tongue (Premsrirat & Burarungrot, 2021). Despite this linguistic reality, Patani Malay is not officially recognized as a language of instruction in the formal education system. National education policies require Thai to be used as the primary medium of instruction in schools, including those located in Malay speaking areas. Consequently, students learn academic content through Thai even though it is



not always their first language. This situation creates linguistic challenges that affect academic learning and English development. While some Muslims in Satun are able to speak Malay, many predominantly use Thai as their first language, reflecting the diverse linguistic and ethnic backgrounds of Muslim communities in the province (Joll & Aree, 2021).

The educational environment in Islamic schools in Southern Thailand involves the use of several languages for different purposes. Arabic is taught as a religious language and plays an important role in shaping students' religious identity in Islamic schools (Nashruddin et al., 2025). Arabic is mainly used for religious subjects and practices, while English is introduced as a foreign language within the formal education system (Oeamoum & Sriwichai, 2020) and is primarily used for instructional purposes rather than daily communication. As a result, students manage several languages simultaneously: Thai for academic purposes, Malay for daily communication, Arabic for religious education, and English for global communication as an EFL. Although English is included in the curriculum, students' exposure to English vocabulary remains limited in multilingual school settings.

These linguistic conditions may influence how students learn English vocabulary. Research suggests that multilingual environments impose considerable cognitive and linguistic demands on learners, as they necessitate the management of multiple language systems simultaneously. Although multilingualism has been associated with enhanced metalinguistic awareness and working memory, the complexity of processing more than one language can also require increased cognitive effort. For example, multilingual individuals have demonstrated higher levels of metalinguistic awareness and working memory compared to monolinguals, reflecting the mental demands of juggling multiple linguistic systems. Multilingual experience can improve metalinguistic and cognitive skills, but requires more mental processing.

Previous research has shown that limited exposure to English in students' daily environments can act as a barrier to effective language learning, especially in rural areas where English is rarely used outside the classroom. Learners often have few opportunities to engage with English in authentic contexts, creating a gap between what is taught in class and how the language can be applied in real-life situation (Tran & Miralpeix, 2024). This limited exposure not only reduces students' motivation but also affects vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation, and the internalization of complex grammatical structures. These findings suggest that insufficient English exposure and use outside formal instruction may restrict learners' overall English proficiency (Astriyani et al., 2025; Yasmin et al., 2024). Research has also demonstrated that out-of-class English exposure through digital media, mobile-based activities, and other extramural practices plays an important role in supporting vocabulary growth and language development among EFL learners (Laufer & Vaisman, 2023; Ebadi et al., 2023; Fachriyany & Murtafi'ah, 2024). Consequently, limited opportunities to interact with English outside the classroom may reduce learners' motivation and hinder the acquisition and retention of English vocabulary. The multilingual environment requires learners to manage multiple linguistic systems simultaneously. Although multilingualism may provide cognitive advantages, it can also increase the complexity of language learning (Müller, 2024; Koch et al., 2024). particularly when instructional support and opportunities for English use are limited. Students must constantly navigate and



switch between different linguistic systems, and this cross-linguistic interaction influence how they acquire, process, store, and retrieve English vocabulary (Otwinowska, 2024). Furthermore, the dominance of local and national languages in students' daily communication often limits meaningful exposure to English, making vocabulary acquisition particularly challenging in non-English-dominant multilingual schools. These findings suggest that insufficient English exposure, together with the influence of multiple languages, may restrict learners' overall English vocabulary development and proficiency.

Although multilingualism can enhance cognitive skills, managing multiple languages while having limited exposure to English may challenge learners' vocabulary acquisition. Previous studies have examined multilingual cognitive demands and English exposure separately, but few have investigated how these factors interact in non-English dominant educational settings. This gap highlights the need to explore how learners navigate multiple languages while coping with limited English input and how these conditions influence their vocabulary development. However, research focusing on students in multilingual Islamic schools in Southern Thailand remains limited. Students in these schools simultaneously manage Thai for academic communication, Malay for some daily interaction, Arabic for religious education, and English as a foreign language. This complex linguistic environment creates unique challenges for English vocabulary development.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze students' English vocabulary mastery and the factors influencing it in a non-English dominant multilingual environment in Southern Thailand.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive quantitative method with a cross-sectional survey design to investigate students' English vocabulary mastery and the factors influencing it within a multilingual school environment. Creswell (2009) states that descriptive quantitative research aims to describe phenomena systematically and objectively through numerical data and statistical analysis. Survey research is used to provide a quantitative explanation of trends, opinions, or characteristics of a population through the investigation of a representative sample (Creswell, 2009). A cross-sectional design was selected since the data were gathered from participants at one specific period of time. The vocabulary test was utilized to assess the students' vocabulary mastery level, whereas the questionnaire aimed to explore factors influencing their vocabulary acquisition. Furthermore, the obtained data were processed using descriptive statistical techniques such as frequencies, percentages, and mean scores.

Research Setting and Participants

This study was conducted at Jareeyatam Islamic Foundation School in Satun, Southern Thailand, during the 2025/2026 academic year. The participants were 31 seventh-grade students selected through total sampling, in which all students in the class were included in the study. The school was chosen because it represents a multilingual educational environment where Thai is used as the primary language of



instruction, Malay for some daily communication, Arabic for religious education, and English as a foreign language in classroom settings.

Research Instruments

Two instruments were used to collect the data in this study: a vocabulary test and a questionnaire. The vocabulary test consisted of 25 multiple-choice items adapted from Rasyid (2023) to measure students' English vocabulary mastery at the junior high school level. Before administration, the test was reviewed and validated by an expert in English education to ensure its content validity and appropriateness for the participants. Each correct answer was scored as one point, and the total score represented students' vocabulary mastery.

The questionnaire consisted of 20 items using a four-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree and measured four aspects: English exposure, English use, multilingual interference, and learning motivation. A four-point Likert scale was employed, ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (4). According to Sugiyono (2023), the Likert scale is used to measure individuals' or groups' attitudes, opinions, and perceptions toward a particular social phenomenon. To ensure content validity, the questionnaire was reviewed and validated by an expert in English education. Furthermore, the reliability of the instrument was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha. The analysis yielded a reliability coefficient of 0.731, indicating that the questionnaire had acceptable reliability and was suitable for data collection.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were employed to analyze the data, including mean, minimum score, maximum score, frequency, and percentage, were used to describe students' vocabulary mastery. To describe students' English vocabulary mastery, the vocabulary test scores were classified into the following levels.

Table 1. Classification of Students' Vocabulary Mastery Levels

No	Vocabulary Test Score Range	Level
1	80-100	High
2	60-79	Moderate
3	50-59	Low
4	0-49	Very Low

Source: Adapted from (Yulianto et al., 2022)

The questionnaire data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, particularly mean scores, to identify the factors influencing students' vocabulary mastery. According to Sugiyono (2023), descriptive statistics are used to describe and summarize collected data through measures of central tendency such as the mean, median, and mode. In this study, the mean score of each aspect was calculated to determine the level of influence of each factor. The resulting mean scores were then interpreted using the mean score interpretation table based on the four-point Likert scale, with categories ranging from Very Low to High, as presented in Table below.

Table 2. Mean Score Category Interpretation

No	Score Range	Interpretation
1	3,26 - 4,00	High
2	2,51 - 3,25	Moderate
3	1,76 - 2,50	Low
4	1,00 - 1,75	Very Low



RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This study aimed to analyze the students' vocabulary mastery and the various factors influencing their performance. To achieve this objective, a descriptive statistical analysis was employed to summarize and describe the results obtained from the assessment.

Students' Vocabulary Mastery

The distribution of the vocabulary mastery scores, based on the test involving 31 participants from the 7th grade of Junior High School (SMP), is presented in the frequency distribution table below.

Table 3. Frequency Distribution of Students' Vocabulary Mastery Scores

No	Score Interval	Frequency	Percentage
1	20 - 30	12	38,71%
2	31 - 41	6	19,35%
3	42 - 52	7	22,58%
4	53 - 63	1	3,23%
5	64 - 74	1	3,23%
6	75 - 85	4	12,90%
Total		31	100%

Table 3 presents the frequency distribution of students' vocabulary mastery scores. The results show that the largest number of students, 12 students obtained scores in the 20–30 interval. This was followed by 7 students in the 42–52 interval and 6 students in the 31–41 interval. Only a small number of students achieved higher score intervals.

The classification of the students' vocabulary mastery levels can be observed and summarized based on the score ranges previously established. The distribution of students according to these competence levels is shown in the following table.

Table 4. Classification of Students' Vocabulary Mastery Levels

No	Vocabulary Test Score Range	Frequency	Level
1	80-100	3	High
2	60-79	2	Moderate
3	50-59	5	Low
4	0-49	21	Very Low

The descriptive statistical summary of the students' vocabulary test results is presented in the table below.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics Summary

No	Number of Students	Minimum Score	Maximum Score	Mean (Average)	Standard Deviation
1	31	20	84	42,97	18,91

Based on the tables above, it can be concluded that the majority of the students with a mean score of 42.97, fall into the Very Low category. The frequency distribution table illustrates that the students' scores are heavily concentrated in the lower intervals, with 38.71% of the participants (12 Students) scoring between 20 and 30. This initial observation suggests that a large portion of the 7th-grade students struggles with basic vocabulary recognition. The classification results reveal that an overwhelming majority of the students, totaling 21 students or 67.74%, fall into the Very Low category, and 5 students into the low category. In contrast, only a small



minority of 3 students (9.68%) managed to reach the High mastery level. This stark contrast indicates that the overall linguistic competence of the class is below the expected standard.

Factors Affecting Students' Vocabulary Mastery

To identify the factors influencing students' vocabulary mastery, the questionnaire responses were analyzed by calculating the mean score of four factors: English exposure, English use, multilingual interference, and learning motivation. The findings are presented in the following table.

Table 6. Mean Scores of Factors Influencing Students' Vocabulary Mastery

No	Factor	Mean	Category
1	English Exposure	2,90	Moderate
2	English Use	2,40	Low
3	Multilingual Interference	2,31	Low
4	Learning Motivation	2,61	Moderate

As shown in Table 6, English exposure had the highest mean score ($M = 2.90$), indicating a moderate level. Learning motivation also showed a moderate level with a mean score of 2.61. Meanwhile, English use ($M = 2.40$) and multilingual interference ($M = 2.31$) were categorized as low. These results indicate that students had moderate exposure to English and moderate motivation to learn. The low mean score of multilingual interference indicates that the students did not strongly perceive their multiple languages as a major obstacle in learning English vocabulary, but students had limited opportunities to actively use English.

These findings explain the students' vocabulary mastery results. Although students were moderately exposed to English and showed moderate motivation, their limited use of English may have reduced opportunities to practice and retain new vocabulary. Consequently, students' vocabulary mastery remained relatively low.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that the students' English vocabulary mastery was generally in the very low category, with a mean score of 42.97. This indicates that many students still have difficulty recognizing and understanding basic English words. Vocabulary knowledge is considered a fundamental part of language proficiency because limited vocabulary can reduce learners' ability to understand texts and express ideas effectively in English (Meung & Htut, 2021). The low achievement found in this study suggests that vocabulary remains one of the major challenges for students learning English in a multilingual school context.

One possible explanation for this result is the students' limited active use of English. Although the questionnaire showed that English exposure was at a moderate level, English use was categorized as low. This means that students may hear or see English occasionally, but they rarely use it in meaningful communication. Previous studies have shown that vocabulary acquisition develops more effectively when learners repeatedly encounter and actively use words in different contexts (Zakian et al., 2022). Without sufficient practice, newly learned vocabulary may not be stored in long-term memory, which can lead to weak vocabulary retention.

Another important finding is that multilingual interference was low, indicating that students did not strongly perceive their first languages as a major obstacle in learning English vocabulary. This suggests that multilingualism itself may not be the



main cause of poor vocabulary mastery. Instead, the main issue appears to be the lack of opportunities to strengthen English through repeated exposure and practice. Research has shown that multilingual learners can manage multiple languages successfully when they receive enough support and meaningful language input (Quoc & Van, 2023). This indicates that, the multilingual environment may not necessarily hinder vocabulary learning, but insufficient English interaction may slow vocabulary growth.

A further factor highlighted in this study was students' learning motivation, which showed a moderate level among participants, indicating that students still demonstrated interest in learning English. However, motivation alone was not sufficient to produce strong vocabulary achievement. Students need not only willingness to learn but also sufficient opportunities to encounter and use new vocabulary in meaningful contexts. In this study, moderate learning motivation combined with low English use may explain why students' vocabulary mastery remained low. (Muthmainnah et al., 2025) reported that supportive learning approaches can encourage students to participate more actively in English learning activities. Therefore, providing more communicative and engaging classroom activities may help students practice and reinforce English vocabulary more actively.

Overall, the findings suggest that the students' low vocabulary mastery was mainly influenced by their limited active use of English in daily learning. Although students showed moderate exposure to English and moderate motivation to learn, these factors were not supported by sufficient opportunities to practice English meaningfully. As a result, students had difficulty retaining and applying newly learned words. This finding supports previous research showing that vocabulary development improves when learners actively engage with new words in meaningful contexts (Quoc & Van, 2023). This indicates that the low level of vocabulary mastery was more strongly associated with limited English use than with the multilingual background itself. In this context, increasing opportunities for active vocabulary practice may be essential to improve students' vocabulary development in multilingual educational settings.

These findings are supported by previous research highlighting the importance of interactive and communication-based learning in language development. For example, participation in English Club activities that involve role-playing, storytelling, and grammar games has been shown to significantly improve students' grammar skills as well as their confidence in using the language (Syahfutra et al., 2025). This is in line with Krashen's theory of Second Language Acquisition, which emphasizes that a supportive and interactive learning environment facilitates language learning through meaningful exposure and real communication (Krashen, 1982, as cited in (Syahfutra et al., 2025)). Therefore, the lack of opportunities for students in this study to actively use English may explain their low vocabulary mastery.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the seventh-grade students at Jareeyatam Islamic Foundation School showed a generally low level of English vocabulary mastery, with most students falling into the very low category. The findings indicate that limited active use of English was the main factor affecting students' vocabulary



development. Although the students demonstrated moderate English exposure and moderate learning motivation, these factors were not sufficient to support strong vocabulary achievement because students had few opportunities to use English in meaningful communication. In contrast, multilingual background was not found to be a major obstacle to vocabulary learning.

The study implies that vocabulary development in multilingual educational settings is influenced more by the quality of English practice than by the presence of multiple languages. Therefore, English teachers in multilingual schools should provide more communicative learning activities that encourage students to use new vocabulary actively in classroom interaction. Creating a learning environment that increases meaningful English use may help improve students' vocabulary mastery and support better language learning outcomes in similar multilingual contexts.

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